



Title: WAR PRISONER

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Genre: ancient, imperial, 1x1 & reverse attachment/ opposite attraction

Warning: Violent and Rape in early chapters

Disclaimer: I own nothing; this is for yaoi fan with no finance gain.

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Chapter 1

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The sand stretches over the horizon; the sun looks like blood. As a few eagles hover in the air back and forth over the dusk and within vicinity, there is no trace of smoke arising from kitchen, making the sunset from the city border look even more like a lonely and desolate place.

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If standing over the top of a sand dune and watching in the distance, you could vaguely see a man dressed in white like snow. Su Yi sat over another dune. A black bamboo flute across his lips; the tone emitted was a very sad melody.

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Suddenly, a burst of horse riding sound was heard, and then gradually appeared before his eyes, as the music also came to an end. Su Yi took the flute away from his lips, sighed and said: "Is there still no envoy from the capital?"

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From behind him, a man dressed in lieutenant costumes dismounted, and whispered: "Yes, General! No one has arrived. The sky showed that it's rather late now. It is best to return the campsite, Sir."

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Su Yi stood up and looked toward the distance, then murmured: "It has been dragging on for two months. How long are they intending for it to last?" His tone was grave. Its temperaments did not match his elegant and outstanding aura.

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The Lieutenant looked up at his beautiful face, hesitantly wanting to speak. It was for some time when he could no longer refrain: "Su General, according to your subordinate, you should not wait any longer. Ten days ago, a group of the trade travelers from the capital had passed through. I had made an inquiry with them, and I discovered that the salary expenditure for soldiers has long been used to build the

Courtyard by His Majesty. I did not want to increase General's anxiety, so I had not informed..."

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Before he finished his sentence, Su Yi General's powerful fist struck the wall indignantly and said: "Benighted King harms the country. How could he use military expenditures for pleasure? Is it not logical that unless there is a home, there will be no nation? Once Kim Liao attacked, even with me, Su Yi here, and exhausted soldiers, how are we to defend? When the country is gone, the beautiful Courtyard that was built would fall into the other people's hands. Ironically, generation of monarchs have yet to understand this principle. Perhaps my Qi's days are numbered?" Then he shook his head and gritted his teeth in distress.

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The Lieutenant quickly advised: "General, there is no need to worry. Someone might have gathered the fund supply and who knows, may be on their way here. It is still best to return to camp now."

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Su Yi waved his hand aside. His face resumed a passive appearance, then said: "Go back Lieutenant. I will stay here a while for a moment of peace. Wan Yan Xu is recently uncharacteristic. From time to time, he had sent spies over. Surely, he will be making a move soon. I really need to contemplate a bit and be prepared for the enemy."

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The Lieutenant knew the General's personality. So, not able to make further proposition, he could only swung on the horse and take the same route back. Su Yi sat on the dune, overlooking the thousand miles of sand and falling deep into his memories.

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Five years ago, he was just a level four rank official and had no association with the royal court. At that time, Kim Liao invaded the border. Every official in civil and military were panicking, but no one dared to agree for warfare, and rather, they

yielded. Angrily, he volunteered and led an army force to rush to the border. That war was a great victory though. Since then, he had yet to return the capital. The reason was the frontier was an important place that needed to be secured, so the Emperor had ordered him to keep patrolling the border forever; and without imperial declaration, he and his troop could never set foot in the capital.

In fact, a rich life was not what he wanted. Although windy desert sand, in his view, was better than burlesque, it was more relaxing and pleasurable. Since he was stationed at the border areas, Kim Liao refused to give up hope. There were countless large and small campaigns since then, but they ultimately failed. Three years ago, Kim Liao had mobilized the whole nation's troops to attack again. Fortunately, his foresaw initiative had skillfully won the battle.

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Kim Liao King had grudgingly die, which directly resulted from the incident before returning to his capital. The King's eldest son, Wan Yan Xu ascended the throne and Kim Liao became static ever since. Qi's King was informed of the victory as he sent a eunuch to declare the decree of an encouragement awards, randomly designated Su Yi a title, and believed that it should be enough for his thanksgivings as an expression of allegiance. Since then, the King sat back and relaxed, happily spend thrifting and enjoying life.

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Su Yi sighed again. His heart knew that Wan Yan Xu is superior compared to his father. This person was still young, but scheming deep, thoughtful deliberations. Just look at him forbearing for three years, and did not send out a single soldier to the frontier. He is a tough one; even the most cunning and brave desert wolf would not be a benchmark to him. In contrast to their side, their King was stupid, delayed military funds and resources, which made the soldiers' conditions unbearable and miserable. Once the war started again, even if he has great skills, he fears that it will be difficult to turn the tide.

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His blurred vision of the dune eventually stopped at that site where countless bones were buried because of the war. His heart bursts with grieves. As a General, he can

strategise to achieve the greatest victory, but he will not be able to protect all of his soldiers. There was a quote, "A General's triumph is over millions of bones".

Probably soon, he will be one underneath these sand. Only he does not know what will happen to the people of his country and what fate they will face.

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He took out the black bamboo flute and placed it across his lips. The heartfelt thousands of emotions, this time, he could only express in music as the heartrending melody drifted by the wind waft over a few miles away. A young man riding high on a stallion, covered in furs and jade, extraordinary momentum and handsome looking that made others not daring to glance at intently. After listening to the heartbroken distant song, his face changed into a hint of cold smile.

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End Chapter 1

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Chapter 2

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Inside a small tent, the aroma of meat had spread in every corner. Ashabu-shabu dish was presented exquisitely and delicately on the table; a pot with few charcoals burned brightly next to it. Although it was blustery outside, the tent felt like spring time, very warm.

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Beside the table, two people were seated. One was the young man, who had heard the song in the desert, and the other was a stunning beauty; eyebrows shaped like mountain, eyes were like autumn water in spring, attitude seemed splendid and elegant temperament, gestures appeared to be thousands of untold, pleasant styles.

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“Master, the intelligence was just received. I’m not sure if it is any use?” The beautiful woman smiled openly, like pearl sound, while pouring wine colour of amber nectar into his glass.

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This young man was none other than Wan Yan Xu, the King of Kim Liao Kingdom. When he saw his favourite confidant maidservant asked, he gave an enigmatic smile. He took a piece of meat from the pot and placed it into his mouth, chewed slowly and long before opening his mouth, “Zi Nong, what news did you gain?”

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Zi Nong respectfully replied to the query, “Your servant saw Su Yi General secretly. Alas, he was very handsome and fine-featured. It is unbelievable that he’s the same Invincible General who has won many battles.” She immediately chuckled.

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Wan Yan Xu expressionless, lightly laughed, “Really? Then you’re more fortunate than me. I have not seen him once, but just overheard a song he’d played.”

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Zi Nong’s eyes widened then arisen, speechless and said, “What? He’d played a song? Your servant heard rumours that although he is a General, he was also proficient in poetry and painting. It was actually true? How could Kim Liao’s men be beaten in battles by such a scholar’s hands?”

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Wan Yan Xu eyes’ light coldly flashed, tone was chilly, “This man is a great accomplisher in both civil and military field. Indeed, three years ago, the last battle between us, I’d violated Father’s order and disguised into the enemy’s army. I’d witnessed his strategic plan. Hence, a few days later, Kim Liao’s army had fallen apart. Alas, unfortunately, I was inexperienced at the time that Father did not listen to my advice. If not, we would not have lost in that field. Consequently, Father died in

the end with much regret.” When he just finished, a sound “pop” echoes. The cup in his palm had been crushed.

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Instantly, the wine’s aroma was spreading. His eyes glazed with coldness, whispered and teeth grinded, “If this avenge is not done, I vow not to be a man.”

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Zi Nong quickly replaced his glass, smiled and said, “Master, there is no need to be impatient. Kim Liao today is greater than three years ago. Until the army arrive, do you not believe you’ll have your revenge?” Then she once again poured the wine into Wan Yan Xu’s cup. When she saw him slowly calmed down, finally felt relieved.

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The sand covered misty dew at the dawn of day. A few men rushed on horseback to arrive where Wan Yan Xu had camped last night. Su Yi, who led the party, saw tents neatly piled on the ground, but there was no one around, and a big flag was deeply ruffled, containing four characters, “This is our ground again.”

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Su Yi stared at those words for a long time, suddenly reined his horse around, coldly spoke, “We have arrived too late. Wan Yan Xu is already gone.”

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Lieutenant Qin approached the flag, raised his voice, “General, it seems they had left in a hurry and forgot the banner.”

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Su Yi sighed and said, “They did not in such a hurry leave the flag behind. Do you not understand yet? This flag is actually a war declaration message. Alas, Wan Yan Xu, Wan Yan Xu. This man’s courage, indeed, is incomparable to anyone. Even as the enemy, I could not help but admit that he is indeed a wise Emperor. Kim Liao has such sovereign, I’m afraid” the rest of the sentence was not spoken since he could not bear to say them, because he did not dare to think it was an outcome.

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“Heralded to our forces, stepping up their training, tight in security, if I do not guess wrongly, there will be imminent battle soon.” His sword shaped eyebrows knitted together, Su Yi commanded, then turned to Qin to ask, “The wages and food from the capital has not arrived yet?”

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The Lieutenant shook his head, gave a worried look. Su Yi sighed, looked up at the sky, thoughtful, *‘The God has done me no harm, but let my fate be ended by the benighted King and those greedy ministers?’*

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Inside the brightly lit General Camp, Wan Yan Xu was attentively studying a map. Zi Nong brought a trace of snack and tea as she pulled the curtain aside to enter, softly advised, “Master, it is already late in the night. Pleading take a rest sire. The imminent war is soon, so keeping in a good spirit is the most important thing.”

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Wan Yan Xu’s vision was still on the map, in a deep voice said, “You go to sleep. I really cannot sleep. For these three years, my thoughts have always been on this coming war. If it is a fight, I’ll certainly not permit Su Yi to respite.”

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Zi Nong said, “Master’s aspiration, how can your servant not know, but this war, Master had intimate knowledge and careful planning, why” Her sentence was not finished but Wan Yan Xu sternly said “As a general, there is no such thing as “intimate knowledge and careful planning”. The battlefield is always changing. Even all the escape routes have to be considered. Precisely because of this advantage that Su Yi has always been victorious. Those lessons are there. Are we going to continue repeating them?” When he finished, he then picked up his cup and took a sip. Suddenly, there came echoes of intermittent sound outside.

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Wan Yan Xu stood up and stretched. Zi Nong followed, doubtful and asked, "That Su Yi is still in the mood to play the flute at this time?"

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Wan Yan Xu shook his head and said, "It cannot be him. In this critical juncture, it is very imperative that the army spirit is not to be falling apart. He'll never play this nostalgic tone. In addition, this flute sounds like extreme sorrow and great despair." He pondered for a moment, suddenly smiled and said, "Qi King is stupid. It seems that Qi soldiers' spirits are low, ha ha ha. Su Yi, I very much would like to see how you'll fight tomorrow."

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After that, in a low voice, he commanded Zi Nong, "Heralds to all Generals. Tomorrow on the battlefield, align the soldiers properly. If possible, capture the enemies but do not slaughter them. I have uses for the prisoners at some point later."

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End Chapter 2

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Chapter 3

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The afternoon sun hung over the brutal battlefield; the light arrays were pierced through the rolling sand like a shrouded crestfallen shield. From time to time, there were a few flowers of blood accompanied with sand flying into the air. The sand was stained with blood from the earlier battle, as a young man's body was partially uncovered beneath the sand with an arm that was terribly mutilated. This is cruelty of war and there can be no words to describe it.

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Additionally, what was more devastating about this great battle's outcome: the country's reputation, the monarch's ambitions and the peace of a nation. Since the stakes are high, whether it is Qi or Kim Liao, they have to do their best because they cannot afford to lose.

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Wan Yan Xu and Su Yi, the highest ranking Generals for each side, were against each other at the centre of the battlefield. Both parties were heavily sweating so the body armours appeared to be increasingly heavier. Wan Yan Xu suddenly quietly said, "The outcome has been fixed, why are you still making unnecessary struggles? If you were to surrender, I'll reward you with wealth and titles. Qi 's King and greedy Ministers, are they really worthy of your sacrifice?"

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Su Yi did not reply. He knew Wan Yan Xu was correct that the outcome has already been determined, whether it was the army or himself. Currently, Wan Yan Xu has strengths to speak but for him, he could not utter a word. If he did so, whatever power he has, would undoubtedly be gone.

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Wan Yan Xu's eyes were flashed with chilliness, coldly said: "You're so arrogant, not even caring to reply." In his resentment, with a third force of the strength, he'd willed the long spear and it powered like the dragon diving into the sea or the tiger jumping down the mountain. Su Yi was already struggling to fight, how could he withstand the attack, and for an instance, he was inattentive. His shoulder was injured by an arrowshot and heavily bleeding, which have stained the body armour; his eyes were vertigo and mouth gave a hint of bleak smile. Su Yi was staggering on the horse before his body was completely and gently captive by Wan Yan Xu. The little strength he had, have gathered in his fist and ready to attack the opponent as the man face came closer. Unfortunately, the enemy realised his intention and took hold of his neck. At once, he completely fainted.

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When he woke up again, the heaven was already filled with stars and speckled of very pale light from a crescent, cold moon. Although there was no wind, it was bitterly cold. Su Yi found that his body sweat had formed a layer of thin ice and seemed to erode the skin. The armour he had own for many years was nowhere in sight, presumably took as a trophy by the enemy for his captivity. The squeaky sound of the prisoner wagon travelled in the night was particularly harsh to the ears.

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A woman's voice suddenly rang out: "The camp site is built. The King ordered me to take Su General to his tent." In the darkness of the night, a beautiful face slowly revealed. She saw that he has awakened and could not help smiling. The starry moonlight was at this moment deemed under her elegance.

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Wan Yan Xu's tent was cosy and warm, but could not melt the iciness in his eyes. When Su Yi was in his sight, his frightening face twisted with a cruel smile, and coldly said: "Su General, do you know how long I've been waiting for this day? Three years, one month and five days. Thanks to God's mercy and with Qi's Ministers' helps, they have made my lifelong wish easily fulfilled."

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Su Yi pursed his thin lips and his eyes were steadfast on Wan Yan Xu. He was surprised to find the other man picked up the roasted lamb's leg from a dish on the table and placed it before him, taunted and laughed: "Are you hungry? I was surprised at how odd the Invincible General was during our combats. It was until I interrogated your Lieutenant that I've discovered the reason, tsk tsk, such a pity. Ah, a famous general, starving without food and had to fight on the battlefield. If this news is spread out, none will believe, ha ha ha." His maniac laughter did not move Su Yi as he was only coldly staring back at the other man.

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Wan Yan Xu's laughter was steeply broken for Su Yi's silence has irritated him, as if he was a clown on a stage and acting in a meaningless one-man show. He grabbed

Su Yi's collar, coldly said: "I am asking you once more, are you going to surrender or not?"

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Su Yi finally replied and the sound was very crisp, but mellow: "No surrender."

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Wan Yan Xu suddenly let go, sneered for a moment: "Why? I've already said, is such a monarchy worthy of your sacrifice?"

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Su Yi said each word distinctly: "My life is only sold for the Qi people." His tone was resolute and ringing with mettle.

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Wan Yan Xu's eyes seemed to be lit up like a ball of fire. Su Yi's stature was clearly smaller than his, but currently, it was as if he has become much taller than him. This impression made him even angrier, and what was more intolerable was the man's calm manners, as if he was not the prisoner but vice versa.

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He gripped Su Yi's shoulder wound. Wan Yan Xu was satisfied when he saw the other man bit his lip. His frantically wicked eyes was staring and grunting slowly: "Su Yi, you probably do not know this. I have always been ruthless with my enemy, especially you, I'll have no mercy, and do you know how much pleasure it is when I thought of torturing you to cry out for mercy? Since you won't surrender, prepare to welcome whatever means I'll cast upon you. Do not attempt to suicide as a martyr, for tens of thousands of soldiers' lives are depending on you, and all of them are in my hands. If you decided otherwise, I'll ensure the tortures that are supposed to be imposed on you be implemented double on them, then kill each one so no one will be spared."

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End Chapter 3

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Chapter 4

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Even a few days later, Su Yi still could not forget that fanatic laughter and his eyes were filled with metamorphosis of bloodlust for Wan Yan Xu. Even if he disregarded life and death and calmly facing all of the possible tortures, he was still scared of Wan Yan Xu's hatred.

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The weather of the desert is fickle. During daytime, it was sunny and extremely hot, and at night, the sand and stone were shifting and very cold. Su Yi did not know how many days he had spent in this weather. Whenever he fainted, Wan Yan Xu would bring him into the warmth of the tent, and when he woke up, the tortures began.

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The only thing that Su Yi was pleased with was that his soldiers did not undergo this inhuman treatment. Wan Yan Xu was always true to what he said. As long as he was willing to endure, then his soldiers will not be tortured. The most tragic he felt was, for the previous two months, his soldiers were starved; but nowadays, they were fully fed by the enemy behind a prison. His heart wept uncontrollably whenever he thought about it.

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A pretty figure came within his sight; Zi Nong could not bear to look at the man, whose hands were tied, wrists were already bloodied and dripping on a thick layer of white sand, and the ground already stained with many large and small drops of blood. The shoulder wound has been swelling and festering.

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Wan Yan Xu deliberately did not give him any medical treatment. He would pour salty water over them a few times daily. Though it was tortured, it was also affective in anti-inflammatory; otherwise the wound would have festered a long time ago to the bone.

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“No, this wound can no longer be left untreated.” Zi Nong whispered and turned to Su Yi’s indifferent face: “Su General, is it impossible for you to surrender? Truthfully, there is no escape route; the King has sent Generals to attack Qi. The land is great, but without you defending, how many days will it take before its fall? In fact, the King is vicious to you but he is very caring for his officials; as long as you surrender, he will treat you with the same courtesy. He often praised you of your talent. You do not have to be worried about trust and be of use to him. My King is very good at acknowledging other’s ability; if he did not want you, then on that battlefield, you would have been killed. Why would he use your soldiers’ lives to blackmail, and tortures to force you into submission?”

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Su Yi looked at the beauty before him and suddenly gave a slight chuckle: “No wonder Wan Yan Xu favoured you. It was probably because of your innocence. Your King tortured me to vent on how Kim Liao was defeated countless times by my hands. He forced me to surrender just to disgrace me. The thought of watching an enemy fell down at his feet and professed as his servant will give him pleasure. Kim Liao’s soldiers have always been aggressive. Your King is a rare talented man. Even if I have enough military resources, I could not guarantee of my winning in this war. Why should he deliberately need to recruit me?” When Su Yi was facing this simple and beautiful girl, he found it’s easier to be opened about his thoughts than with the vicious Wan Yan Xu.

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Zi Nong was speechless. She looked at his worried eyes and could not resist and said: “Su General, what are you worried about? Are you worried for the Qi people?”

Those words indeed stabbed into Su Yi's heart, the images of people died under the iron heel of Kim Liao, his tears almost shed and his mind was filled with deep remorse.

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Zi Nong patted his shoulder and comforted him: "Do not worry, Su General, the King had ordered; no soldier is to take advantage of the occasion when breaking into a city, to burn and loot the people. He said that sooner or later these are all going to belong to Kim Liao. Although your people will taste the pain of conquest, but their lives and properties would not suffer too much damage. Currently, the one suffering the most is, in fact, you. How long has it been since you last drink water? Your lips are cracked dry with several lines."

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Su Yi may have hatred for Wan Yan Xu, but also respected the man. If Qi can have such a monarch, he would never worry about the country's bustling prosperity and lasting of the kingdom. Suddenly the carriage stopped. Then Su Yi realised that his naked legs were souring pains and has already gone numb.

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Zi Nong looked back and suddenly gave a cry of joy. She got up and shouted: "Zi Liu sister." She quickly ran over and hugged the incoming woman.

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The distance between them was too far and the sunlight was strong so Su Yi could not see the woman's face, as she and Zi Nong have already entered Wan Yan Xu's carriage; but a moment later, a guard came to him and grumpily said: "The King ordered to see you." When he finished, his hand grabbed on the rope that tied Su Yi's wrists. Su Yi staggered but the guard did not care and continued to stride forward.

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When he came inside the car, Wan Yan Xu was comfortably sipping wine; Wan Yan Xu slowly sat up when he saw Su Yi entered. His face giving a polished smile and

shook his head, then chuckled: "What a pity, ah, a dignified Invincible General to become this emaciated." When he finished, he grabbed hold on his long, sandy hairs and sighed: "Unfortunately for such a beautiful hair."

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Su Yi nonchalantly stared at him and unmoved. It was indeed accurate and said whenever seeing him, he'll get chills. Wan Yan Xu was lying down again and lazily said: "Zi Liu, I'd deliberately call you here not in order to fool around. You are to look at his injury and see what you can do about them."

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End Chapter 4

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Chapter 5

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The woman called Zi Liu was not as beautiful as Zi Nong, but had a heroic vitality posture. She turned to have a quick look after she heard the order. Her face showed surprises and said: "Master, the wound has been festering a little. We must remove the dead flesh before properly bandaging the wound. Otherwise, once it festered to the bone and with the desert, hot weather, even the god Da Luo Jin Xian cannot save him."

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Wan Yan Xu pretended to be amazed and eyes widen, speechless and said: "This serious, ah, then what are you waiting for? Quickly heal Su General for such talented man is to be neglected, would I not be distressed."

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Zi Liu hastily ordered her assistant to get the medicine cabinet and opened the box, then took a bottle of anaesthetic. She was about to give the medicine, but Wan Yan Xu stopped her and laughed: "You're underestimating Su General. Who do you think he is? Long ago, when HuaTuo helped Guan Yu cure his poison, the man could talk and laugh freely. Su General's body is like a steel frame, thus, it must be better than Guan Yu. It is a good time that I can witness this."

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Zi Liu immediately understood Wan Yan Xu's intention after her master's outburst. She hesitated then placed the anaesthetic back into the box. She took a sharp knife out as it flashed coldly and lit a candle. She was heating the blade over the candle, moved it back and forth a few times and whispered: "Su General, although this is a small surgery, it will be really painful. You must endure a bit." She looked back at Wan Yan Xu and a few guards and saw that their faces were excited. She sighed, knew that these people have defeated Su Yi and truly hated him. How could there be compassion? Zi Nong was fearful so she had already slipped out of the carriage.

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When the tip of the knife cut into the flesh, blood immediately poured out. When it cut deeper, only a slight sound of the blade and flesh are grinding as more blood surged out without stopping. Su Yi still looked calm as if he had not budged, and only droplets of sweats were rolling down his face; and his clenched fists showed a glimpse of his agony in this moment.

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Wan Yan Xu's excited expression gradually disappeared and the guards' joyful expressions also gradually converted into admiration. Zi Liu's hand began to tremble, then she took a deep breath and looked at Su Yi. She finally ended the cruelty. The knife quickly slashed and instantly cut out a chunk of rotten flesh; vaguely beneath the blood, the bone was revealed, which held more attention to the people's eyes.

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Su Yi finally was unable to withstand the pain as his body swayed and passed out on the soft wolf fur mattress. Zi Liu quickly took a clean soft cotton cloth and carefully

bandaged him. The guards were already whispering and talking about Su Yi with full admiration. Zi Liu knew Kim Liao folks' feelings are swift and fierce, but they mostly admired hero Su Yi's endurance which clearly impressed them. When she looked back at her master and saw his ashen face, his eyes were staring at Su Yi's pale face, suddenly turned his head away and heavily grunted.

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Zi Liu said: "Master, the wound had been carefully bandaged, but it would not be suitable to be under the sun. Please give him rest for two days. We're approaching Kim Liao so revenge could wait for another day."

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Wan Yan Xu was indifferent and said: "Just as you has recommended, lock him up in a prison in the carriage behind."

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'In the end, still fainted,' Su Yi was helplessly thinking. 'If possible, I would not want to use this method to make Wan Yan Xu look weak,' he felt since he has been captured, he had been collapsing again and again, 'instead of dignified manner, he was acting like a pathetic woman. How hateful. Nevertheless, I ultimately am a human. There are always limitations on a physical body. Even if I mentally want to, I cannot control it.'

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Inside the carriage, there were about a dozen women who watched over Su Yi with curiosity. They are labourers for the army such as cooking and washing. Su Yi's superior appearance and bearing seemed to brighten the place and could not stop others from paying attention to him. He was even more embarrassed of these northern women's behaviour as they do not have the same etiquette education, even forthrightly spoken about him like he was not there. If it is possible, he would rather not be here even if he had to be exposed under the sun. If Wan Yan Xu knew of

such reaction, presumably, he would be very astonished. The enemy could not conquer him with brutal tortures, but the words of these women have made him very restless.

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Finally it was two days later, Su Yi suddenly found that the women were no longer talking about him, and their faces were joyfully smiling, often looking outside. Then his heart sank; a faint hint of despair ached in his heart and he knew that they have arrived in Kim Liao. His own life, whether it is long or short, would be the end here (in a foreign land).

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Zi Liu and Zi Nong suddenly went inside and the women quickly scattered away to avoid them. Zi Liu looked at Su Yi's wounds and chuckled: "It's probably alright; it seems to have produced new muscles." She looked solemnly at Su Yi's face, lowered her voice and said: "General, we have arrived in Liao Kim capital. Do you know what path waits for you? Are you as determined as before and outright, refused to bow?"

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Su Yi suddenly gave a faint laugh: "Thank you lady, I'd intended never to change my mind."

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Zi Liu sighed, shook her head and said: "General's integrity, Zi Liu truly admired. Then as old phrase goes, **'have different directions thus, will be in disagreement'**, Zi Liu have nothing more to say. For the road ahead, hopefully General will take care." When she finished, she took Zi Nong, who did not bear to accept this, and without looking back, they went out.

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End Chapter 5

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Chapter 6

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Kim Liao's death row prison has always been located in the capital. Not only was it heavily guarded, but there were also masters of martial arts secretly patrolling. Su Yi did not understand at first why such forces were necessary at a death row prison. In Qi, when a prisoner was sentenced to death, the person seemed to become more docile because they have lost all hope. Thus, it was much easier to oversee them than other inmates. Whilst Liao Kim is different, he discovered that death row inmates tried their best to escape; even when the guillotine is happening the next day, they would contemplate on how to jailbreak the night before. What was more surprising was that Wan Yan Xu did not try to stop the attempt or squash the inmates of this idea, but just happily strengthen the defence of the prison.

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Wan Yan Xu's name has been lingering on Su Yi's mind for the last few days. As a General, he is a good one and as a King, he is more daunting. Su Yi had little doubt on why Kim Liao only took three years to recover. A nation that never gave up hope hence, there was nothing that can prevent its growing power. Perhaps the mark of his defeat was when Wan Yan Xu ascended the throne three years ago.

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He could hear the heavy door opening and two jailers bravely went into his cell. One of them stepped forward and violently torn apart Su Yi's shoulder garment off, looked at the wound, then sneered: "Su General, your wound is better. His Majesty is asking again: will you surrender or not?"

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Su Yi smoothes his clothes and coldly said: "My decision has been made. Wan Yan Xu already knows so there's no need to ask diligently."

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Another jailer snorted and said: "If so, then it is such a pity." His eyes fiercely stared and took Su Yi's heavy flailing chain, then said loudly: "Do you know what is waiting for you now?"

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Su Yi said nonchalantly: "Execute or guillotine, do as you wish." When he finished and calmly stepped out, he heard the jailer spat with disdain and said: "Yeah right. Just wait for grave torture then surrender. Like the previous La Guguo De's General years ago, who was just like you, but after that....." Before his sentence was completed, the other jailer interrupted: "Shut up, do you want to die? He is now a General who led the army to fight Qi. The King is extremely confident in him. Be careful. That man's servants can hear you."

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Su Yi sighed. He heard of Yu Cang's famous surrender. What else is there to say? Those who know the time was right are astute people. Wan Yan Xu was really a good master. Each person's ideal is different. For him, it was impossible.

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The study room was quiet and filled with light lily aroma. Wan Yan Xu was holding a history book, leisurely turning over the pages. Zi Nong came in but he did not look up. His mouth formed a provocative smile, then casually asked: "So? Has Su Yi surrendered?"

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Zi Nong did not dare to breathe aloud, sneakily peeked at his face, whispered and said: "No, not yet."

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Wan Yan Xu sat upright, his eyes shot at Zi Nong and before long, he slightly relaxed. He leaned back at his royal seat and regained his usual laid-back composure, then said: "Really? He has not surrendered yet? I remembered it only took three days for Yu Cang. I never expected Su Yi to have such endurance. I'd like to see whether his bones are made of iron."

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Zi Nong's heart leapt and quickly said: "Master, those words are inaccurate. Yu General was truly subservient to master. If it's only torture, I fear that he may not be willing to surrender so fast."

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Wan Yan Xu revealed a hint of smile at his servant, then suddenly said: "Isn't that right? My thought was clearly expressed, but what Zi Nong said, why not go enlighten him about it? Heralds my command, I'll go to death row prison."

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Inside the torture chamber was eerie. The brutal burly torturers were severely torturing Su Yi; they were trying to force him to yield. When they heard the King arrived, their usual aggressiveness suddenly was quivering in fear. Wan Yan Xu was known for his equally rewarding and severe punishment. It seemed that five days had passed and his frail looking enemy had yet to be weakened. They were ashamed of themselves, but have no idea what to do to make their ruthless King satisfied? If he is displeased, then their lives will be forfeited. This thought made their admiration for Su Yi turned into resentment.

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Wan Yan Xu was surrounded by the crowd at the torture chamber's door. He was cloaked with a white fur coat, and his regal was radiant through the beautiful royal robe, allowing others to see his ethereal appearance like sacred jade which looked outstanding.

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Su Yi managed to raise his head and looked at him. He saw his familiar mouth with a pleasant, curvy smile, though his chilly eyes were gazing over the crowd. His heart trembled in shock. This man was duplicity. Although ingenious, he was not a magnanimous gentleman. The man would never easily let him go, even if he was calmly accepting martyrdom. When he thought of this, Wan Yan Xu appeared before him, suddenly reached out and lifted his chin. His tone was gentle and said: "Su General, I never thought you would be this stubborn." Although his tone was soft, yet, his whole movement revealed that of contempt. Su Yi quietly looked at him, not saying a word. The cell was suddenly very quiet that if a pin drops, it could be heard.

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End Chapter 6

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Chapter 7

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Wan Yan Xu had already seen his nonchalant face so he did not feel irritated this time. His gaze swept over the blood that has spilled from countless wounds at the top of the head down to the toes. Su Yi's body were bruised all over and not an inch of the skin was unharmed. He nodded with satisfaction, turned around to the jailer and said: "I'd thought you were being lazy. It seems I've been unjust by thinking so. However, this simply is not the way. What will happen if he dies before surrendering?"

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The Head Jailer stepped forward and respectfully said: "Master, we did not dare to break bones. These are only skin wounds, and they do look terrifying and also really painful. However, this prisoner is a man and in good health. Master doesn't have to worry that he'll die from these wounds."

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Wan Yan Xu nodded, smiled and said: "This is good."

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He turned back to face Su Yi. He saw that the arrowshot shoulder wound was already healed from the torn garment, but a scar was visible as the size of a coin. He looked at Su Yi's pale complexion, suddenly held out his hand and slowly caressed the scar and said softly: "You're still being stubborn, why even bother? Does it still hurt here?"

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Su Yi's body could not help but shivered, though it was clear that Wan Yan Xu was playing game by being persuasive in return for his gratitude. There was no hidden, wicked motive behind the gesture, but he still could not accept this close, intimate action. He instantly reacted by turning his head back and sideways. His thin lips growled with anger and disgust to remind that the enemy was standing before him.

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Wan Yan Xu was stunned and puzzled over the reaction. Then he saw a slender, white neck under untidy hair, which was the only place without injury. Under the pearly earlobe, he saw it quickly flushed. Although the sight was briefly seen, it has radiated an allure. He came to his senses and noted that Su Yi is Qi's people, who were living in the south, and highly valued Confucianism. His action would be considered as a great honour if it was placed upon his soldiers (people), who would've felt grateful for such merciful act; but in the eyes of this man, it may have become something of a different sort.

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On this very thought, he quickly took his hand off, smiled and said: "Su General is truly stubborn. If it is time that you want, I'll wait for you." He turned to leave when Su Yi suddenly said: "I've told you. Su Yi's lives belong to Qi's people. You don't have to wait in vain."

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Wan Yan Xu went outside without turning his head, gently smiled and said: "If it's so, then I've given a target for the jailers to have a good practice. You're in good health, then might as well see how you'll tolerate under a hundred and eighty types of torture." After he had spoken, he strolled off. The jailers who were kneeling down finally dared to breathe again.

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In the blink of an eye, ten days have passed. Wan Yan Xu still heard no report of Su Yi's surrender. His heart became more and more impatient. He is a very ruthless man and extremely intelligent. He treated those he valued with enticements and penalties. Yu Cang's surrender was by this extraordinary means. Although with Su Yi, there was hatred and several times, he tried to entice Su Yi to surrender, but the man seemed blind to them. So then his thoughts turned toward tortures.

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In truth, his wish for Su Yi to surrender for the keen use of a talented man was actually very little; mostly it was out of being to be able to dominate over a man who had repeatedly defeated Kim Liao. The man's surrender would be his proudest

achievement. Nevertheless, when he saw Su Yi enduring over tortures, it only made him troubled and his heart gradually felt respect for the man.

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His bright eyes slightly looked up; the pot of orchids in bloom on the window was spotted by his eyes. This flowerpot was given by Yu Cang, but he did not like orchids. He felt the flower was too fragile and took too much time to nurture. Since it was given by a good subject, he chose not to discard it, but left it on the window in the Royal Office. It was surprising that the flower plant has survived over a winter. Instead of dying, it has bloomed. He took a closer look and saw that the flower was about the size of a small tea cup. The white petals have a touch of pink, giving it a feeling of an unobtrusive elegance.

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Wan Yan Xu stood up and went over to the flowerpot, carefully stroked the silky petals. He felt the smoothness and delicacy of it. Somehow, the feeling suddenly reminded him of the sight on the top of Su Yi's shoulder. His heart suddenly stirred, though the scar on the shoulder cannot be compared to these petals, but that neck was delicate like these white petals. Thereby, his thought shifted on to the fact that Su Yi has yet to surrender. A very self-righteous man, indeed, is not inferior to the rare orchids. His wandering thoughts were always coming back to Su Yi. Since he could not change them and was too lazy to care, he commanded Zi Nong to come serve him in changing clothes, and then the two of them, master and servant, went straight to the death row prison.

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In this moment, the jailers had done the tortures for the day; they led them carefully into their prison cells, and saw Su Yi curled up on the floor. The long, messy black hair covered his face, though they can see from the figure that he had lost a lot of

weight. The clothes have been torn apart by dozens of weapons that were used for torturing. The ragged pieces revealed deep bruises or red, swollen of scars and some visible parts of white skin looks undamaged, but with a closer look there, it was covered with a few small marks that simply cannot be seen by the naked eyes.

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Zi Nong's heart was full of pain and could not bear to look as she quickly turned her head away. She was shocked to see her master's eyes firmly fixed on that emaciated body. The eyes were like a fire that's about to erupt.

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End Chapter 7

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Chapter 8

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Zi Nong, at a young age, has been living in the palace and also on several occasions, with Wan Yan Xu, she has camped with the soldiers hence, accustomed to seeing those stares. She was, for a moment, surprised, looked back at Su Yi whose body was like a broken rag doll, *'how could it possibly evoke a desire inside of Wan Yan Xu. Master was not in favour of a male partner, so why were his eyes like that? Maybe I'd guessed wrong.'* She did not understand why would Wan Yan Xu lusted for a man, and a hot-blooded man like Su Yi, a body covered with blood to seduce his carnal needs.

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Wan Yan Xu tried to control himself, but suddenly Su Yi looked up. As the four eyes locked, the man's unyielding has remained in domitable. The hatred in his heart was urging to burst out to take control, and he almost instantly wants to enter the cell, to place the other man's body beneath him, to see how stubborn the man will last till the end. His fists clenched and with great difficulty repressed his desires. He turned angrily away and ordered Zi Nong: "Let's go." Then he left without looking back. Su Yi was surprised and wondered what bee is in his bonnet.

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Wan Yan Xu did not like a male partner. Although homosexuality was popular in Qi and Kim Liao in this era, which he did not persecute but did not care for it either. Nevertheless, the sudden situation was fated coincidence; the thought of Su Yi's tortured body was desirable made him shocked and angrier for such reaction. He thought that maybe the situation had arisen because he was too busy with country affairs and had not been spending times with his concubines. Therefore, when he returned to the palace, he went to his most favourite De Yinji's chamber.

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De Yinji and her maidservant were playing chess for fun so upon heard the King's arrival, she hastened to go freshen up, but Wan Yan Xu pulled her back. Since she was the King's favourite concubine and a clever woman, she quickly saw the desire in Wan Yan Xu's eyes and was quite clear of his needs. She hastily withdrew her servants and seduced by using endless gentle words with him, and embraced Wan Yan Xu as she led him inside her chamber.

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Normally, De Yinji's behaviour would be enough to make Wan Yan Xu pleased. However, today for some unknown reason, when he looked at the beautiful face and the grin smiled, he felt even more depressed. Su Yi's delicate face suddenly appeared in his mind. The man's face may not be vividly beautiful like the face before him and always surrounded with a gush of cold, haughty air. His face was

arrogant like Ochna Integerrima and yet, elegant like an orchid. He has very thin lips, and those lips have been refusing to emit any sounds so easily, but tightly pursed; the pain and its groaning was held by his stubbornness behind the lips, reminisced others to feel hate and empathize with him.

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He was deep in thought that he did not know when De Yinji had removed his coat, and she left only a red undergarment, exposed half of pale as snow body, which arouses other's reveries. She was breathing breathlessly and smiling charmingly, said: "Your Majesty was busy these days and did not bother that your servant is missing you." When she finished, she was laying on Wan Yan Xu's arms, really seductive and indescribably attractive.

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Wan Yan Xu at this time did not feel the slightest desire for her, especially upon hearing that sentence. What he most currently needed is to conquer, and to conquer a wilful man will ensure his satisfaction. How could De Yinji's yielding body possibly meet his needs? He pushed the body coldly away, draped his coat on again then he saw the stunned eyes thus, only casually coaxed and said: "I suddenly remembered some important businesses to take care of. You can continue playing. I saw that the last time you were interested in jade bracelets. Tonight, I'll order Xiao Shunzi to give it to you." He finished off quickly, and left a rejoicing De Yinji, who kept thanking him.

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Zi Nong thought that when her Master entered the concubine's chamber, he would not leave there until half a day later, so she looked for Zi Nan to have a chat with. When Wan Yan Xu could not find her, he simply called Zi Liu over and said: "You'll go to death row prison and bring Su Yi here; I want to personally question him."

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Zi Liu wondered why the man should be interrogating though he is an enemy, but kept her lips tight. Nevertheless, with the look of her Master's face with stiff tendency, she did not dare ask. She quickly went to death row prison and had a few jailers brought Su Yi over and hastily went back to the palace. Wan Yan Xu then ordered everyone out. She was puzzled and quickly queried: "Your Majesty, this is not good. Su Yi is good at martial arts, if you get hurt....."before she finished, Wan Yan Xu sneered: "If he is this skilful, I would know. Now get out. My rules, you still have not yet understood?"

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Zi Liu knew he has always been uncompromising, too afraid to counsel and dejectedly went out. She quickly searched for ZiNong and Zi Nan to lash out: "You came here to enjoy yourself, instead of waiting on Master."

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Zi Nong giggled and laughed: "Master is doing that thing which does not require my attendant, so why should I not steal a moment of laziness? At this moment, he must be going crazy with De Yinji?"

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Zi Liu was surprised and said: "What folly are you on about? The King is simply not with her Ladyship. I was working on medication when he ordered me to go and take Su General to the palace, and said that he will interrogate the man. Even I was not allowed to remain there."Before she finished, she saw Zi Nong's eyes widen as big as a bell. Zi Nan, who has always been composed, even panicked and hastily asked: "Zi Nong, do you know what the King's intention is? Quickly tell me."

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Zi Nong was impatient and said: "What else to say? If we're not leaving now, it will be too late." She stood up to leave. Zi Nan and Zi Liu glanced at each other, was about to follow her outside as well, but was surprised to find her slumped down, depressed and said: "Well, what can I do even if I'm going? Oh, the poor Su General.....Well what happened to the King? He had not cared for those things before."

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End Chapter 8

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Chapter 9 -11

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Zi Nan and Zi Liu were anxious to the point that they pinched and urged her: "What's going on, you should tell us something at least?" Zi Nong then retold them the scene in the death row prison, and finally made a given up gesture said: "What do you think, how we should approach this?"

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The trio and Zi Yan, who is currently fighting in Qi with Yu Cang, are Wan Yan Xu's most beloved servants. They were smart and masters in martial arts; hence, their ranks were much more than simple maidservants. After hearing the situation, they have no idea what to do. Disorderly discussed for a while, but still nothing had changed. Zi Liu hastily exclaimed: "Why are we still discussing about this? If we are continuing, there would be nothing left of Su General's bones."

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Zi Nong pouted and said: "Will there be any bones left even we were not discussing about it? No matter how we are going to analyse, we still are only our King's servants. We're not Su General. Though he was pitiful, our loyal is with His Majesty. Since when the King decided this course of action, we we do not have the position and the power to stop it. Moreover what's the point of forestalling it? It's quite useless given the King's temperament; you should already know this."

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The trio looked at each other although they knew Zi Nong's speech may sound foolish, but it was the reality and could not help feeling slumped down. Zi Nan said: "What does he look like? I heard he's only frail, not like the usual rough and forthright type General. How could three thousand beauties in the palace not pleased His Majesty, but him? I must see the man for myself one day."

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There, the trio discussed the incredible possibility in account of their King's preference. Wan Yan Xu, who saw injured Su Yi's body, did not rush to force the other man. He was not a hot headed man, but took things slowly even with intimacy, in order to experience the most pleasure out of it. Otherwise, like a pig (Zhu Bajie in Monkey Magic) that gulped a fruit in general, with only momentary gratification, but was dull without flavour. This thought was very consistent with his disposition. At this point, the other man in his eyes has become very thin, and seems to be easily slaughtered as his mind started to contemplate several ways in order to have fun with him.

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Su Yi has remained alone in the Royal Study Room. He found that the place was quiet and serene, not a torture room since there was not even a single rope insight, *'how will he interrogate a prisoner. Does he still want to use that persuasion*

strategy,' he looked at the other man's expressionless face, without slightest smile but maybe there is a hint of it.

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He was puzzled over Wan Yan Xu's intention and was surprised to find that he has come over; the determined eyes were focused on his, suddenly, he deeply chuckled: "Su general, these last few days, you had been mistreated. I feared you had not even showered. Look at this body, blood stains are everywhere. This truly is not consistent with your noble character. Alas, it is my negligence, but does not matter. I can compensate this overlooked matter, do follow me." Then with one punch, the force had broken the chain in half as he pulled Su Yi along at the back of Royal Study Room.

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Su Yi felt even more clueless about what the other man's intentions were, though they are adversarial stance, so he stood motionless and not moving an inch. In reality, he suffered a lot of tortures with little rest. Thus, his strength has long gone, but with the sheer will of unyielding has stopped him to find support. Wan Yan Xu was a little surprised but chuckled: "You actually still have some strength left; truly amazing, even better." Wan Yan Xu finished as he tucked the hair away from his forehead. Suddenly, with one arm wrapped around his waist and picked him up, hastily walked to the backroom. While he walked, he said: "Su General, I have never carried anyone else before, even my favourite concubines. You should feel honoured."

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Su Yi was surprised, for this is no trivial matter. Although he was not knowledgeable in regards of sexuality, but knew that this carrying was somewhat wrong. Moreover, Wan Yan Xu was parading him with his concubines. Subsequently, with this line of thought, the intention seems to be very obvious. Nevertheless, he does not understand even with his former appearance that was a hundred times more attractive than now, had unmoved Wan Yan Xu. *'Why does he desire the present*

body that is covered in filth?’ Besides, he had never heard this young Emperor ever caring for a male partner before. ‘Am I being too suspicious? But but.....’

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Su Yi’s silent had killed Wan Yan Xu’s amusement. Of course, in case of his courtiers, some would not be panicking in such situation but to be nonchalant like Su Yi, then there is none. Even Yu Cang, who’s also a great warrior, though compared to Su Yi, would be a little off the mark in reaction. However, he did not know. In fact, Su Yi had no idea of what his intentions are. The other man did not want to overly interpret those words; seems to be vulgar by doing so.

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When they entered the backroom, there really was a large pool, surrounded by heavy crimson curtains. At a distance, vapours curled upward due to transpiration of heat. Wan Yan Xu was not into pleasures in life, so this pool was not as grand as the one in Qi’s palace, magnificently built but with rather striking formal layout. Several handmaids have knelt down and were waiting for them. Wan Yan Xu gestured for them to leave, “If I am not calling for you, then do not come disturb me.”

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Su Yi felt slightly shaken over the whole thing. Wan Yan Xu’s statement was very ambiguous, even those handmaids looked at him in amazement, *‘could it be...I have unfortunately guessed it right?’* He could not convince himself that is was a possibility because of what he knew about Wan Yan Xu’s personality, *‘the other man had never done that kind of thing.’*

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Although it was unbelievable, but in such circumstances, Su Yi started struggling, though his body was held in Wan Yan Xu’s arms so there was no leverage around for him to make use. Before he tried to give the other man a few kicks, Wan Yan Xu bantered a smirk, a “boom” sounded. Fully clothed, he was thrown into a deep and

large pool.

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Su Yi suddenly choked on the water and he heard Wan Yan Xu laughed on the surface: "Su General should be at ease, for this water is from the back garden spring water, and is absolutely clean. It's actually quite good for your health; drinking more would only benefit you. Perhaps it would add a little to your effort, and may even help you struggle in my arms a few times." After he removed his garments, shows a bronze body then another "boom" sound as he jumped into the water. The splashes have busted the water to cover Su Yi's sweating face. The messy black hair has become wet, sticking to the shoulder and looked a lot softer.

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Su Yi subconsciously took a few steps back, his clear eyes for the first time has clouded, looking alert at Wan Yan Xu. The other man's body has no trace of fat nor scars, like the jungle's most vigorous elegant panther that he saw once at royal hunting ground, seems to be the most appropriate to describe the other man at the moment.

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Wan Yan Xu's eyes flashed with frantic excitement, went forward step by step closer to Su Yi. Walked to his aside and said: "Why are you wearing clothes here? Not to mention they're rags, there is no difference in wearing them or not. Or maybe Su General rather let me undress you personally? Ha ha ha, you know how to play hard to get."

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Su Yi was forced to step back at edge of the pool, and then listened to the lewd speech; he could not help but trembled, knowing that he had the misfortune of being correct in his deduction. His hands clutched the pool edge, and attempted to stay calm and said: "You've always been serious in your approach, so please control

yourself. A person can be killed but cannot be humiliated, such despicable act, you should not do it.”

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Wan Yan Xu crooked his eyebrows in challenge, leisurely said: “Serious approach? Oh, what a joke. Su General has experienced in battle field and worked hard to maintain your country’s peace, but seemed to lack knowledge on human desire. Have you ever heard of a King who takes serious approach in their love life? I simply do not behave wildly like Qi’s King but these words, I certainly do not deserve to bear.”

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Su Yi wondered whether the person in front of him was a fake Wan Yan Xu poser. The man’s speeches were frivolous, teasing eyes and not the same man he had known, who looked cold and dangerous. Although acting seems to be easily played out, but the dominance of royal bearing could not be mimicked by anyone. Currently, Su Yi has nowhere to retreat. Wan Yan Xu was not worried, took another step forward whilst Su Yi clenched his fists and prepared for a fight, though he knew it was impossible to struggle due to his exhaustion. Nevertheless, as a seven-foot man, he cannot face such a humiliation, not to mention, the worst case scenario is death. He was captured and has no right to live any longer. Though, through his fear that if he offended Wan Yan Xu, his soldiers would be killed, so he only bitterly endured to this point. Death to him is like a road to freedom.

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His mind quickly held onto the idea and his eyes intently stared at Wan Yan Xu, waiting for the other man’s action. At this point their bodies gradually close in. Suddenly he was leaned into the water; Su Yi did not comprehend it until his foot was taken a hold by a strong force, at once fell in the pool, once again swallowed a large gulp of water. Then a pair of strong large hands tightly embraced his waist, crashed sound, both were simultaneously returned to the surface, his ears were echoes of Wan Yan Xu’s laughter: “Ha ha ha, I’d caught you.” Before he finished his

sentence, the hands have already begun to move, torn off Su Yi's tattered wet clothes, and thrown very far away.

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Su Yi's heart sank as he immediately noticed one pair of hands, like slippery fish, carefully stroking his wounds; he had never received such humiliation even when he was a child. His blood boiled; the two rows of white teeth clenched hard and about to bite his own tongue to suicide.

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Those hands, suddenly like lightning, changed their directions, and instantly grabbed his jaw. Wan Yan Xu's laughter was gone and back to his scornful attitude, his eyes cold as the autumn bottom lake, also restored his consistent chilly tone: "Su General, do you really want me to learn from our ancient predecessors by killing all the prisoners? If this does not matter to you, then I'll immediately give command to Yu Cang so that he can execute the two hundred thousand prisoners of war instantly. There is also Qi's citizen matter, if they are of no concern to you; in fact, my people are quite populated and have been suffering these last few years. They should enjoy themselves when they are moving to Qi's capital, the southern prosperous land. Oh right, by the way, Yu Cang's army has come to Yangtze River. Your emperor had fled the capital, took a few of his close ministers and henchmen to Suzhou. He has established a small court in Suzhou. Yu Cang is currently resting his army, and ready to head south. Su General, the prisoners of war plus Qi's citizen, should be over hundreds of thousands of people. Since you do not care for them, why should I need to pay them any attention? It is your choice." Then he slowly loosens his hands.

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Su Yi saw his smile with a touch of sarcasm; evidently, the other man knew he could not selfishly allow other people to go on suffering if he could help it. He tried to calm himself, made an effort to persuade: "I'd always respect that you are a wise King.

Even if I die, I believe that you will not do anything without benefits to you. Are you not afraid of the wrath of God, retribution of karma?" Although he may said those words but his heart knew it did not count, so quickly he side away from Wan Yan Xu's hands.

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Wan Yan Xu snorted, hold him again and solemnly said: "Su Yi, listen to me. I do not believe in gods or spirits. Qi's soldiers, besides those under your command, simply could not take a blow in battle and I have no interest in them. Your subordinates, who had followed you to battle for many years, they are brave and loyal. Therefore, only a few is really willing to surrender. Why should I heed for the rest since they are wasting food? Only with your life, really do not justify being the exchange for their lives. Although, if you're dead before surrendering, this would be the one thing I'll surely regret in this life. So Su Yi, you have to believe, I could easily take action according to what I say, otherwise I'll never be able to quash down my anger."

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Su Yi looked calmly into his cold eyes, broken-hearted and grief-stricken as he bitterly said: "If you want me to surrender, at least resort to an open means and not via such depravedly, vile method. This only sullied your reputation and will only make me despise you."

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Wan Yan Xu sneered and said: "A means to an end. Why is it a matter whether it is through an honourable act or despicable one? What's most important...is for me to have you under my body, listen to your crying out for mercy. Whether you'll surrender or not today, your body will be used to gratifying my needs." Then suddenly leaned over and gripped the desirable lips, also prevented him from breathing.

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Su Yi was born into a scholarly family, with great emphasis on ethics. He did not get a chance to wed before he led the troops to war. During his time at the barracks, he was also abstinent and not engaged with any prostitutes. So although he is full grown man, he did not understand the taste of love affair. When Wan Yan Xu forcefully kissed him, his mind was buzzed with an “Om” sound, like countless of stars flying around. Although he did not understand this kissing, but intuitively guessed that it was probably a dirty move. Therefore, his hands tried desperately to push the other body away as it was pushing his down.

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Wan Yan Xu found his innocent reaction very exciting. He saw that Su Yi was a naïve kisser, did not even know how to avoid being kissed. Apparently, this man knew nothing about love affair and was very much like a piece of white paper; a man likes him, who is very possessive and selfish. To know that Su Yi’s first time belonged to him, of course would please him greatly. Then he excitedly placed Su Yi at the pool edge where half of the body is still immersed in the water. His hand started tearing off what little left of Su Yi’s clothing.

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Su Yi body was suppressed, due to his frail body being smaller than the other man’s and exhausted. No matter how much he struggled, only echoes of a faint thump sounded in water. Gradually, there was a trace of red expanding along with the water bubbles; since the wounds have not been healed and the two were tossing thus, torn these wounds apart. Su Yi felt terrible pain as the wounds reopen and soaked in the warm water. Consequently, when Wan Yan Xu’s tongue left him, he had groaned loudly.

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Wan Yan Xu dazed, maybe he guessed wrong. He was wondering why he has been emotionally affected so easily. Unexpectedly, he saw the other man’s eyebrows knitted, thin lips pressed tightly into a line and face seemed to be filled with pain;

then he saw the water, and the blood was spreading upstream. He hastily lowered his head to examine the wounds and found they were not really deep, but there were large numbers of them, though not life threatening. This assured him and just about to embrace the man again, but Su Yi has taken the opportunity to make room and manoeuvre his body to kick him in the chest. Suddenly lost balance, Wan Yan Xu fell in the pool. Su Yi quickly turned to the rear to escape. Wan Yan Xu's hatred once again ablaze in his mind as he grabbed the long hair in the water and severely pulled Su Yi back.

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Su Yi felt the sting and once again, his body detained in the arms of Wan Yan Xu, looked at the other man's angry face and before he could make a move, a hand slapped across his face. After that, the other man fiercely shoved his head under the water, unable to breathe and choked in the water for a while before he was released, but not before long, Wan Yan Xu repeated the process again and again. Currently, Su Yi was physically weak and barely able to stand such torture thus, gradually he stopped struggling. Wan Yan Xu lifted his head and saw that Su Yi was already unconscious.

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Wan Yan Xu dressed and called the handmaids back to the room as he coldly said: "Bathe him but do not bandage his wounds. Then change the pool water before reporting to me when it is done. Geez, little Su Yi, I cannot believe I could not make him surrender. I have plenty of time to slowly play with him, until he yields."

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The handmaids heard his merciless chilling tone, knew that he is very angry and wanted to teach this prisoner a lesson, felt terribly afraid and became speechless. Wan Yan Xu huffed as he went and left them busy to bathe Su Yi.

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When Wan Yan Xu returned to the Royal Study Room, he saw that Zi Nong, Zi Nan

and Zi Liu have gathered there. They awkwardly met him and one by one were looking embarrassed; do not know what to say. He frowned and coldly said: "What's going on? What's your problem? Why have you all come here?"

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Zi Nong was the first to speak. She was relying on his favouring her. After granted permission to speak, she quickly looked up and said: "Master, where is Su General? Your servant wanted to ask if you like me to take him back to death row prison."

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Wan Yan Xu was not angry instead laughed and said: "This should be no concern to you. He is still staying at the pool, and I am not finished in interrogating him."

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Zi Nong was shocked, in a panic, said: "What? Master had not finished yet? Why does he need to be soaked in the pool? Are you only bathing with him?" When she finished, she saw the sight of Wan Yan Xu's sword eyes, and realised of her being indiscreet, coughed and tried to giggle: "Thatso Master only used water as a form of torture. Your servant is stupid and had not thought of this. So Master, please excuse us and you can return to your interrogation. We'll wait for your command to serve you." She was so scared and tongue-tied; then pulled the other two outside the room.

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Wan Yan Xu angrily snorted, picked up a book and casually flipped them and was quite upset. He has always been proud and arrogant, but Su Yi has not bow under his hard or soft persuasion. Su Yi not surrendering was also unexpected. Of course this has enraged him. After the handmaids reported that all was done according to his command, he discovered that he had been reading the book backwards for nearly an hour.

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Wan Yan Xu returned to the bath and saw Su Yi was still not awoken; he looked at the handmaid, who was scared as she rushed down kneeling, and said: "Master, he woke up once but started to kick and punch so your servant used sleeping incense on him that is why he has not woken up."

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Wan Yan Xu nodded, did not blame them. With Su Yi's temper, he should have known. He saw Su Yi's body covered with a bathrobe, his eyes were closed and his body was lying on a bench beside the pool, the long black hair has been neatly combed, there were a few curls hanging on the chest; the gap of the bathrobe shows a pair of small nipples almost visible. Although the body was still covered in scars, it arouses his reveries. He immediately felt his crotch burning and could not help but gulped mouthfuls of saliva.

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End Chapter 11

War Prisoner Chapter 12

The palace maidens didn't wait for his instructions, sensibly, they quickly retreated. After they left, Wanyan Xu approached Su Yi, and carefully took Su Yi into his embrace. The thin lips, usually stubborn and unbending to the point of making others' teeth itch [1], were slightly parted, imparting a thread of softness. Su Yi's complexion was still pallid in the aftermath of the cruel torture, although his cheeks were stained with a hint of blush due to the steam rising up from the bathing pool. His eyelashes were both long and thick, giving the impression of a pair of small fans. At this instant, his whole visage was much more gentle and adorable, making it difficult for people to believe that this was the very same General Su Yi who was

hailed as being invincible on the battlefield.

Wanyan Xu stretched out his hand to caress Su Yi's smooth bare neck, pausing again and again to linger over the scar there. Recalling the scene in the prison earlier that day, he had a feeling of agitation in his heart. Leaning his body down, he seized the petal-like lips which were slightly parted with his own. This time Su Yi was powerless and unable to resist, allowing Wanyan Xu to enjoy himself to the fullest, licking and sucking at his leisure. Wanyan Xu's other hand, originally empty, did not remain idle. Caressing and meandering across Su Yi's body, they arrived at the pair of small protrusions on his chest which he promptly began to tease, pinch, press and roll.

Just when Wanyan Xu was completely enthralled in this enchanting sight, he heard a low sound ringing by the side of his ear. Straining his hearing, he could just make out a voice calling out "ying ning". Knowing that Su Yi was about to regain consciousness, he couldn't help but heave a disappointed sigh as if he was about to lose something. His arms encircled the person in his bosom even more tightly around the waist. As expected, Su Yi's eyes soon opened slightly. Looking at Su Yi's foggy puzzled gaze, Wanyan Xu felt his soul racing with dissolution. Barely able to control himself, Wanyan Xu wanted to take Su Yi at once.

Fortunately for Su Yi, he regained his senses at this moment. Watching as a pair of red clouds settled across Su Yi's cheeks in his rage and panic, Wanyan Xu unconsciously increased the force of his ministrations to the red protrusions on Su Yi's chest. Looking at him mockingly, he casually remarked, "Are you ready? I [2] am already impatient." So saying, he hauled Su Yi's body up, perching Su Yi's buttocks on his long-since engorged desire.

No matter how obtuse Su Yi may be, he could not fail to understand the implications of Wanyan Xu's actions and words. Blushing ever more furiously, he vigorously wiggled and twisted his body in a desperate struggle to escape while cursing in a loud voice: "Wanyan Xu, you're shameless! You're worse than a beast! You... You... You..."

Wanyan Xu showed no signs of rage, and his hands finally made their retreat from Su Yi's chest. There was no respite for Su Yi however, before he could even heave a sigh of relief, he found that his pants were being stripped off by Wanyan Xu. Wanyan Xu scoffed at Su Yi lightly: "go on cursing, the more you curse, the uglier your words, the more excited I will become. But... these words are so old-fashioned; can't you come up with something more creative?" So saying, he revealed his enormous member, brushing it against Su Yi's bare buttocks repeatedly.

In any other set of circumstances, Su Yi would undoubtedly be crying and begging for mercy. Never, not in his wildest dreams, could he have imagined that such a misfortune would one day befall him. However, he could not submit at this time, at this place, to this person. Faced with an imminent catastrophe, he couldn't think of what to say. With his mouth half-opened, as if to protest, he was unable to squeeze even a single word out.

Looking at Su Yi's red lips and shell-like teeth, the fire in Wanyan Xu's belly erupted to new heights. Tightly clutching the immobilized body, with a bow of his head, he began to forcefully nip and bite on Su Yi's smooth rounded shoulder. That organ on his lower body seemed to have developed a consciousness of its own, seeking out the crevice between Su Yi's butt cheeks, dawdling at the entrance to the peach garden of pleasure. With a sudden forceful thrust of Wanyan Xu's body, dreadful screams erupted from Su Yi. That enormous object mercilessly made fierce strikes against him, yet not even the tip managed to get inside.

No matter how patient or deliberate Wanyan Xu could usually be, at this moment, he was like an arrow drawn taut on a bowstring. With new urgency, he forcefully nibbled and bit at the pair of tortured grains on Su Yi's chest. Just as a distant well cannot slake immediate thirst, this was not enough for Wanyan Xu. The disappointing object below his waist made a few attacks with impassioned vigour against Su Yi's back entrance, however this being Su Yi's first time and with the passage unmoistened, entry would not be so easily attained. Su Yi was in such pain that sweat was dripping off his forehead like rain. Wanyan Xu was not having an easy time either; his handsome face was flushed red from exertion.

Just as they were at an impasse, a glimpse of Su Yi's red lips which were pressed tightly together in pain gave Wanyan Xu a sudden thought. When enjoying bedroom games with his concubines in the past, there were some who would, for the sake of pleasing him, service him with their lips. This was known as playing the flute. Presently, Su Yi's back entrance was too tight but he could no longer wait much longer for release. Seems like it was time to play the flute instead. The person pinned under his body had perfected the art of playing the bamboo flute; however his skill with playing this unconventional flute remains to be seen.

At this thought, a smile blossomed on Wanyan Xu's face. Just when Su Yi had been tortured to the point of regretting having ever been born and wishing that death's door would open for him, his body was abruptly flipped over by Wanyan Xu. His first thought was that Wanyan Xu had become impatient with his failed attempts and was giving up the notion of having intercourse with him. Just as he was thanking heaven for the reprieve, Su Yi was unpleasantly shocked to find that the terrifyingly huge pillar had appeared mere inches before his face. It even touched the side of his lips.

Stunned, he raised his head, only to be met with the sight of Wanyan Xu's delighted face. "Su Su, your behind is too tight, looks like it needs me to educate it properly before it can open up, but I just can't wait, so I have no other choice but to unfairly demand that you use that little mouth and red tongue of yours to help put out its fire." After saying that, he promptly pressed Su Yi's head down, and began to work towards that alluring goal.

Hardened by years spent on the battlefield, Su Yi was apt to remain calm under myriad circumstances. Still, this time, he felt such fear that his soul was almost ready to depart his body. Such a dirty thing, and Wanyan Xu wanted to make him use his mouth... there was no way he could accept such a thing. "Wu... Wu..." a few terrified whimpers escaped him, but he didn't dare to open his mouth, afraid that at the first opportunity, that thing will worm its way inside.

Su Yi's weak arms desperately pounded on Wanyan Xu, but were ineffectual in serving as any deterrent. Instead his efforts served only as an amusement and caused Wanyan Xu to further burn up with lust. Freeing a hand, he exerted all his

strength towards prying Su Yi's mouth open and forcing it towards that enormous shaft.

War Prisoner Chapter 13

In many circumstances, resistance is futile. Su Yi was in just such a tragic situation. The shiny red object had made contact with his tongue, causing a wave of revulsion to sweep through him. Having been starved for a few days, he could only retch dryly, unable to even throw up the acidic liquids in his stomach. Wanyan Xu cared nothing of his wishes, continuing to press on his head, until half of the *** [1] was probing his mouth. Soft and smooth black hair hung down, silky threads falling around his groin, the slightly ticklish sensation was indeed very pleasurable. The already enormous object stuffed into Su Yi's mouth grew even larger with the additional stimulation.

Black spots appeared in front of Su Yi's eyes, his mind was feverish, his heart was in turmoil, and subconsciously all he wanted to do was bite down viciously. Suddenly, Wanyan Xu's demonic voice rang out beside his ear, "Don't force me to torture the prisoners of war to death." This threat was even more effective than Tripitaka's "Headache Sutra" [2], Su Yi's teeth, which had begun to clamp down in a biting motion, abruptly stopped moving in mid-air. In contrast, the thing in his mouth had already been twitching threateningly for a time, and now started to lightly slide in and out, penetrating deeply into his throat. He could neither swallow nor spit, with his thin lips formed into an oval shape, a few strands of saliva flowed down from the corner of his mouth like silver threads, winding down to wet his clean neck.

Wanyan Xu furrowed his brows; Su Yi quite obviously didn't have even the slightest bit of experience. In comparison to the techniques employed by his concubines, there was a world of difference. However, for reasons he didn't understand, he found that he was deriving more excitement and enjoyment from this encounter than with his superbly skilled concubines. He felt as though there were a few hundred fiery torches in his stomach clamouring to be released, the stimulation from poking into Su Yi's mouth was not adequate. Heaving a sigh, Wanyan Xu rested his finger on the entrance to Su Yi's backyard. The skin on Su Yi's buttocks, originally smooth and

fine, was now mottled with purple bruises. Softly, Wanyan Xu said: "Su Su, do as I [3] instruct, otherwise I'll have you use this to satisfy me instead. It's your choice." With that, he lightly made a dig inside with his finger. Wanyan Xu's long finger was smooth and slender, obviously nowhere as long and thick as ***. Although the small opening was tight and dry, it gave way easily under the sudden stab.

Although Su Yi's heart was as hard as iron, he couldn't prevent his eyes glittering with unshed tears at this moment, only his stubbornness prevented them from falling. The feeling of having his backside invaded by a foreign object caused all the muscles in his body to be bunched up tightly. Under the present circumstances, he was obliged to make a choice, however, given that the two options available were both extremely shameful, he was in a quandary.

Wanyan Xu seemed to be able to read his mind, laughing softly he said: "if you are obedient, after I have enjoyed myself I will drop the matter. But if you don't serve me well, after I have finished using your tender red mouth, I will use your rear; after all, I don't wish to miss out on either." Having said that, he gently pumped his finger in and out of that tight, narrow tunnel a few times. Immediately, he felt Su Yi's body begin to tremble.

"Do you want to choose the front end?" He gave Su Yi's extremely flexible hips a few light slaps. After a good while, he saw Su Yi give a slight nod with much difficulty. Under the crushing humiliation, a single tear was finally forced down from Su Yi's eye, soon disappearing without a trace among the silken strands of his hair. Wanyan Xu couldn't help but be moved, a trace of affection rose in his heart, tangling with other confused thoughts and feelings that he couldn't make sense of. Withdrawing his enormous organ from the small red mouth slightly, he patiently instructed: "First use your tongue to give a few swirls around the tip, bring me inside, then suck and lick around the entire thing. Your movements must be gentle, don't use your teeth, if you dare to bite me, you will suffer in turn. If you perform well, I will allow you to have a look at your soldiers from a distance."

A mixture of persuasion and threats, this "carrot and stick" method of instruction really did produce the desired result. Wanyan Xu watched in amusement as Su Yi

raised his head with great difficulty to glare at him with eyes that appeared to spit fire. Su Yi moved his lips slightly, and a fresh cooling sensation descended upon the fiery hot pillar, before dissipating in the blink of an eye. Leaning down, he brought his face close to Su Yi's jade-like countenance, gently blowing on those long eyelashes, he laughingly said: "Not bad, but it's far from enough, so continue! Tsk Tsk, the look in your eyes is indeed impressive, it's almost enough to set me aflame."

Su Yi struggled for a long time before he finally managed to control his desire to bite off the troublesome thing in his mouth. With great difficulty, he extended his dainty tongue, shaped like a sprig of lilacs, to encircle and rotate around the enormously thick organ. To his dismay, that thing had grown even larger and thicker. Just as Su Yi had been driven almost to his wits end by terror, he heard Wanyan Xu's unrestrained moans floating from above and realised that this greatly hated enemy was actually enjoying himself very much. Su Yi was chagrined, unable to think clearly, he thought to himself, "Even if I don't dare to bite it off, don't tell me that I don't dare to take even one bite? Anyway, there is only this much space in my mouth, with two rows of teeth, occasional mistakes should be acceptable." As that atrocious thing expanded even more rapidly right under his eyes, forcing his mouth into a painful stretch, he hesitated no longer. Sharp white teeth gave the stem a heavy bite before beating a hasty retreat, his eyes flashing Wanyan Xu a look of defiance.

Wanyan Xu felt as if his whole body was floating amongst the clouds. Su Yi's blowjob, though unpolished, made him experience pleasure such as he never had, it was the satisfaction of carnal desires mixed with the thrill of successful conquest, no one had ever brought him to such heights before. His passions greatly stirred, the area beneath his abdomen seemed host to a thousand fiery dragons, all threatening to surge out. At this critical juncture, just when he was going to attain the peak of pleasure, an acute pain suddenly pierced through his instrument. "Wa ya!" In tremendous pain, he released a blood-curdling scream and looked towards Su Yi. Su Yi calmly raised his head to look back at him, slowly spitting out his ***, coldly he said, "I'm sorry, I am too unfamiliar with such practices, and made a mistake."

War Prisoner Chapter 14

Wanyan Xu was infuriated; although he knew that Su Yi was lying, he had no means of proving it. Even more unfortunate was the feeling of having been cast from the clouds into a dark bottomless pit, never in his life had he ever tasted such bitter frustration. Grabbing a fistful of Su Yi's long hair, with malicious intent he said: "Is that so? Never mind, even the unfamiliar will become natural with practice; I [1] shall give you further instruction." With no further explanation, he again shoved his thing into Su Yi's mouth. Using one hand to clamp down on Su Yi's jaw, he relentlessly directed his shaft to charge violently around Su Yi's soft oral cavity.

Su Yi was not about to be outdone. Although in a disadvantaged position, he desperately searched for an opportunity to employ his teeth as weapons, trying to make contact with the thing that seemed so hard but was actually so vulnerable. Wanyan Xu's rage had not yet abated, with one hand he exerted all his strength into restraining Su Yi, with the other he kept rubbing and kneading Su Yi's chest roughly. Under his abuse, the two vermillion buds were swollen and throbbing with pain, but this did not soothe his anger. The wounds that had previously accumulated on Su Yi's body were reopened during the struggle, a few drops of blood dripped down onto the wet rim of the pool. He did not seem aware of his injuries, instead intensifying his efforts to resist Wanyan Xu.

What a trick of fate! Who would have thought that two people born to be adversaries could turn even the game of love and sensuality into a battlefield, resulting in a confused muddle? Regretfully, no matter how tough and resolute Su Yi may be, he was destined to be the one defeated. As Wanyan Xu's mood got increasingly more elated, Su Yi felt a gush of hot liquid squirt inside his mouth, before he even realised what had happened, Wanyan Xu made him turn his face up by tightly gripping his neck, forcing him to fully swallow all the *** [2].

After Su Yi realised the origin of this liquid, he immediately bolted to the edge of the pool and began to vomit, what little bile he had in his stomach was emptied out as well. Wanyan Xu looked on coldly as Su Yi's body, riddled with scars, was wracked with shudders and convulsions. An indescribable feeling of ease and contentment

filled his heart. Gripping Su Yi's body, he laughingly said: "Since you find it dirty, I'll be generous to the end, you can have another wash." Giving Su Yi a mighty pull, the two of them tumbled together into the pool.

Su Yi's body was already frail from the weeks of maltreatment, and he had engaged Wanyan Su in a ferocious struggle for ages, in addition, the momentum of his fall into the water was fast. A sheet of black descended before his eyes, once again he collapsed in a faint. Wanyan Xu carried his body to the edge of the pool and propped him up. Using warm water from the pool, he delicately rinsed the wounds that had split open and were bleeding while also seizing an opportunity to take advantage of Su Yi. After toying with Su Yi for less than an hour he felt totally relaxed and delighted. Climbing up, he grabbed a bath towel and rubbed their bodies dry. Half-supporting and half-carrying Su Yi, he strode into his royal bedchamber, making no effort to hide their arrival together.

The three attendants, Zi Nong, Zi Liu and Zi Nan were in the middle of preparing the bed for their master's use, changing the bedding and lowering the curtains. The sight of the duo approaching caused them to stare so hard that their eyeballs nearly popped out of sockets. Zi Nong swallowed a few times, gathering her courage before audaciously asking: "my King, is General Su still alive?" Even before the sound of Zi Nong's voice had faded, Zi Liu hurried to interject: "your Majesty, please don't be angry. Zi Nong meant to ask if we should sent for guards to take him back to the jail for convicts condemned to death. The inner court [3] is a restricted place after all. Not only is he a foreign male, but he is also a prisoner of war, it is not appropriate for him to be here..." She could not continue with the rest of her speech, Wanyan Xu was glowering at them ferociously, as if he wished to devour them alive for their insolence. After a lengthy spell had passed, Wanyan Xu gave a chilly snort and said: "There is no need for you to be concerned with my affairs. He'll stay here tonight, It is indeed opportune that you are changing the bedding, fetch an additional set, make sure that it's made of thick warm material. As for dinner, I will not be going to the halls to dine with the Imperial Concubines [4]. Have it served here, and make sure to prepare more nourishing dishes. Humph... trying to die from weakness... I won't allow it!"

Although these words were uttered between gritted teeth, the clever Zi Liu could detect a thread of warm tenderness in the undertones. However it was too indistinct, whatever underlying feelings Wanyan Xu might have were merely in infancy. Looking at Wanyan Xu gaze intently upon the unconscious Su Yi as if he was peering at the first blades of spring grass showing through a blanket of snow, Zi Liu couldn't help but heave a deep sigh, a dark thought surfacing in her heart: "If his Majesty has truly developed feelings for this captured general, for the both of them, this could bring both good fortune or disaster."

Zi Nong had no such misgivings; beaming, she left to carry out Wanyan Xu's instructions. Wanyan Xu called Zi Liu over, bidding her to treat Su Yi's wounds. Only then did Zi Liu dare to ask, albeit with hesitation: "Master, will General Su be subjected to more harsh punishment in order to force his surrender?"

Wanyan Xu chuckled and said: "torture is ineffective against him; I have found a better method of tormenting him. From now on, there is no need to bring him back to the prison."

Zi Nan approached and said: "Master, a while ago, Lady Yin was crying piteously in the palace, it seems like the young Crown Prince has been up to some mischief. Her Ladyship said that she begs your Majesty's forgiveness for failing to take care of the Crown Prince and has to request that His Royal Highness's care be given to another imperial concubine."

Nodding, Wanyan Xu replied: "I understand. The Crown Princess [5] died young, I have been occupied with matters of state and neglected to guide Shuo Er [6] well causing him to develop a cold and callous personality. He's already so crafty and cunning at such a young age, how could Lady Yin control him? Send for him tonight, he will dine with me."

Zi Nan would sorely like to say that the Crown Prince was devious because he was always glued to Wanyan Xu, and had picked up that trait from his sire. But of course, Zi Nan would never dare to articulate such a thought. She [7] knew that the little Crown Prince Wanyan Shuo loved to spend time with his father; perhaps the royal

palace would know peace only when he was with Wanyan Xu. After Zi Nan left to instruct the palace attendants to summon the Crown Prince, Wanyan Xu asked Zi Liu: "Were any battlefield reports received from Yu Cang? The king of Qi is fatuous, and none of the ministers that serve him is a talented field commander. Just relying on the Yangtze River to provide a natural defensive barrier is an exercise in futility. With Yu Cang's ability, he should be able to prevail without expending too much effort."

Zi Liu's entire face brightened, and in a joyful tone said: "Master's deductions are indeed correct. General Yu Cang sent messengers to say that they have reached Jiangnan. Some time has passed since he ordered those messengers to depart, so those cowardly commanders should have capitulated by now. Master once said that to conquer Zhongyuan [8] is your life-long ambition. It's only a matter of time before the Qi King and his court surrender and are executed. Master's great ambition will soon be realised." Her voice had barely faded before she heard a moan emanate from above her head. Su Yi had awoken without anybody noticing, now, he propped himself up on one arm, twisting his body to the side, he made a "waa" sound, and promptly spit a mouthful of fresh blood onto the floor.

War Prisoner Chapter 15

Wanyan Xu and Zi Liu were greatly startled. Wanyan Xu was able to restrain his anger, and just gazed at Su Yi steadily. Zi Liu busied herself with stooping over Su Yi, checking him over while questioning him: "Is General Su feeling alright? Do you have any more residual blood in your mouth? It's best to spit it all out..."

Unexpectedly, Su Yi reached out to clutch her hand tightly, not answering her questions, he fixed his eyes upon hers, with a trembling voice he demanded: "You... What you said... Is it true? Could it really be true?"

Neither Wanyan Xu nor Zi Liu had ever seen Su Yi like this. Throughout his captivity, he had maintained a resolute composure; the image he presented to the world was as placid as a frozen lake, hidden under that, he had a strength of character as unyielding as iron. Never before had he appeared frantic and vulnerable. Zi Liu began to review the recent events, and understood immediately that her

conversation with his Majesty must have been heard by Su Yi. This man was a loyal patriot, and had dedicated his life towards serving his country, the news he had overheard must have been tantamount to the heavens collapsing and the earth caving in.

Zi Liu's heart softened and she couldn't bear to speak further. Su Yi was still clutching her hand in a vice-like grip, as if holding on to the last straw that could save him from drowning, and kept on asking: "It's... true? It's... really true?" She cast a pleading glance at Wanyan Xu, only to see that his eyes were as hard as iron, ostensibly, he was totally unmoved. Suddenly Wanyan Xu's hand shot out, grabbing Su Yi's wrist, he wrenched his hand away from Zi Liu's. He said icily: "Whether the news is true or not, do I [1] have to repeat it?"

Su Yi stared defiantly into his eyes, like a wolf preparing to engage in mortal combat. Eventually despondency slowly showed in his eyes, and he hung his head. Although Su Yi was obviously trying to force them back, the sound of muffled sobs was subsequently audible. Zi Liu's earlier joy now gave way to heartache, as she thought to herself: "A country ruined and their people starving, this misfortune is truly traumatic. Hopefully he will be able to get over his shock, and won't consider self-destruction."

Wanyan Xu suddenly lunged forward, forcefully turning Su Yi's face up, he yelled: "What is there to cry over? Such a fatuous monarch, what has he done for the common folk? He has brought only disaster and suffering to the people, even your defeat on the battlefield, was it not of his making? Even your current predicament was caused by him, yet your heart is still capable of feeling sorrow for him."

Beside them, Zi Liu could only subtly shake her head on hearing these words, thinking to herself: these words were obviously meant to be comforting, but why do they have a different ring when uttered by his Majesty?

Su Yi suddenly raised his head to look Wanyan Xu directly in the eye, the tears he had shed for his country's impending doom now cleared from his face, and said coldly: "I'm crying over the fate of my country, and its storied history. How does that

concern you?" Zi Liu could only heave another sigh, thinking privately to herself: really, do these two people have to be at such loggerheads all the time!

Just as she was about to leave the chamber, she saw Zi Nong returning with the evening meal, Zi Nan was also leading the Crown Prince towards the room, making sure to keep a good grip on the mischievous little boy. Turning back, she saw that the two men were still glaring daggers at each other, neither of them willing to back down.

-----Some time later-----

The destruction of Qi country was a massive blow for Su Yi, he felt like a hole had been drilled into his heart and his blood had turn to tears. However, Wanyan Xu kept up his daily harangues, pouring frigid irony and scorching satire upon Su Yi's pain. There were times when Su Yi was on the verge of letting Wanyan Xu prevail, such as when he was forcing himself on Su Yi. Fortunately for Su Yi, he was entirely ravaged both physically and mentally; so pale and wan that his very appearance was capable of frightening people. Ironically, this caused Wanyan Xu to have some misgivings and he did not dare to be too brutal. In spite of Wanyan Xu's abuse, he had meat and fish served to Su Yi for every meal, as well as various health elixirs. Su Yi could not fail to recognize his vile intentions; obviously he was expecting that once Su Yi was recovered he could enjoy himself without restraint. Although he had every intention to reject the food, he couldn't afford to defy Wanyan Xu when he again despicably used the lives of the Qi people and soldiers to threaten him. This duel was fought repeatedly over a month, to Su Yi's chagrin, although he was still feeling unbearable anguish, his disappointing body refused to cooperate and steadily began to recover.

Wanyan Xu was greatly overjoyed, although this was not because he loved Su Yi. It was because of the temperament he had cultivated from his childhood; when he wanted something he would never give up until he had it in hand. Besides being gifted with an innate intelligence, he was also born into a powerful royal family. In his

entire life, with the notable exception of Su Yi, he had never met with any setbacks. Therefore he was intent on settling this score; he was determined to have his way with Su Yi. Day-by-day, as the look in Wanyan Xu's eyes grew evermore pleased and lusty; Su Yi grew more alarmed and vigilant around him. In his heart, Su Yi knew that to sit and do nothing but wait was not a good solution; he wracked his brain, trying to think of a way to make Wanyan Xu despise Su Yi to the point where all traces of desire would be extinguished. He would much rather have returned to the prison, even if he had to suffer all the cruel torture techniques devised in this world.

The weather on this day was mild, having been forced to go out into the sunshine by Wanyan Xu, Su Yi sat down on a lounge chair in the courtyard. Because of geographical reasons, Jin Liao had little in the way of brightly coloured flowers. Featuring jade-green trees reaching to the sky mixed with stumpy shrubs, in terms of elegance and beauty, this courtyard could not hope to compare with those in the Great Qi country. Su Yi was a little overcome by emotion, sighing out loud he thought: although this tree does not have brilliantly coloured flowers, its foliage is lush, full of vitality. In this aspect, the flamboyant but delicate blooms and rare herbs grown in the warm and nurturing climate of the south cannot compare.

Just as he was lost in these dark thoughts, he heard a cool and clear voice. Tinged with a hit of sarcasm, it recited a poem [2]: “Beauties in the Chu [3] palace sweep their brows with umber, alas, even with their beautiful maquillage, they can only enjoy the spring sunset silently, having no one to converse with. Throughout the ages the ultimate difficulty is eternal death, General Su is not the only grieving soul in this world.” Su Yi was greatly startled, turning his head in the direction of that voice, he saw a woman even more dazzlingly beautiful than Zi Nong walking at a leisurely pace towards him. Her phoenix eyes [4], filled with provocation, were gazing at Su Yi. Half-laughing, she said; “General Su, do you think my modifications [5] to the poem were appropriate?”

Su Yi was proficient in both martial arts and scholarly studies; of course he understood that she was borrowing this ancient prose to taunt him, implying that he was greedy for life, afraid of death. Studying her carefully for a while, suddenly he

heaved a heavy sigh and said: "Miss, you have accompanied General Yu on his military expedition, together you have done a great service to Jin Liao by destroying the Great Qi. Your country and people are in ascendancy; in addition you have won great personal prestige through your deeds. Su Yi's feelings are those of a defeated general, where death is now preferable to life; how could you possibly understand me?"

Realising that Su Yi had deduced her identity, she did not seem surprised. Slowly she walked over and took a seat. Smiling, she said: "I have long heard tell of General Su's talents, your reputation is well earned indeed. I should have known it would be so, after all, how could an ordinary person attract such attention from our king? Especially since you are a man."

Su Yi's face grew even more somber, coldly he said: "Miss, please do not hesitate in your ridicule, your king does not care about his reputation. I too, find his behavior despicable."

As Su Yi intended, those words served to wipe the smile off that lady's face. She said: "Zi Yan would never dare to comment on his Majesty's affairs, but if General Su is unwilling to receive his Majesty's favour, there are better solutions than berating yourself and drowning in self-pity. Unless General Su intends to play a long game, loosening the reins only to grasp them better..." Before she had finished, seeing that Su Yi's expression had begun to change, she hurried to placate him, saying with a smile: "if this humble woman has unintentionally caused General Su to take offence, perhaps I could teach you a method of provoking disgust in our King to make amends?"

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With these words, Zi Yan monopolised Su Yi's attention. This was the very matter than he agonized over day and night, feeling that with his disadvantaged position he had no means of gaining the upper hand. If Wanyan Xu insisted on taking his pleasure with Su Yi, Su Yi could see no means of escape other than death. Although Su Yi was not afraid of dying, he could not bring himself to take that route, afraid that

Wanyan Xu's wrath would be vented on his people.

Zi Yan smiled coldly and said: "I don't need your gratitude; I'm not doing this for you. My brother fell at your hands on the battlefield; there are no words that could adequately describe the depth of my hatred for you. By teaching you this method today, I merely wish to remove your proximity to his Majesty's person. I served General Yu in his campaign to vanquish the Great Qi; naturally you would hate me to my bones. There is no need for you to feel embarrassed or grateful should I succeed in saving you today."

Her frank words were uttered with the utmost conviction; Su Yi couldn't help but to regard her with great esteem. In a low tone he said: "since Miss has put it this way, Su Yi will naturally obey"

For the first time, Zi Yan allowed a genuine smile to brighten her whole face, while replying: "It's good that you agree. Even if you really do become the new favourite of our king, I will still devote my energies towards finding a way to harm you, whatever the risks may be. If that comes to pass, don't blame me for employing ruthless methods." Looking at Su Yi, she continued: "Being an intelligent man, do you really not understand the reason why our King is so fixated on you?"

Su Yi thought to himself: "Of course I don't know, otherwise I would not be resigned to awaiting my fate with bound hands." Zi Yan could guess at his thoughts, laughing she said: "You are also a man, surely you know that the harder something is to obtain, the more attractive it is? Because you put up such fierce opposition to everything, you have inadvertently stoked our King's taste for conquest, bringing this disaster upon yourself. Now all you need to do is to present yourself as an abject snivelling coward, his Majesty would not even care to spare you a glance then."

Su Yi's eyes widened, so shocked he could barely speak. "What? You want me to show weakness in front of him? That's impossible, a proper soldier can be killed, but he shall not be humiliated! He has even destroyed my nation the Great Qi, in the process forcing me to become the instrument of my country's doom, for me to bend and scrape before him, that's absolutely impossible."

Zi Yan laughed derisively: "If you don't show weakness to his Majesty, does that mean that you will not suffer humiliation? Forgive me for saying something unpleasant. For an imposing seven-foot tall [1] man to be used like a woman, even if he was being forced, how can he have the wherewithal to live on and face the world? Won't that be even more disgraceful? Besides, you only need to pretend to yield. As long as his Majesty has lost interest in you, all he would do is to kill you, imprison you or release you. Which of these options is not preferable to your current dilemma? This is all Zi Yan has to say, I will leave General Su to think it over." With these words, she stood up and not bothering to take her leave, glided out of the courtyard.

A thousand feelings and thoughts were racing in Su Yi's heart and mind. The more he mulled over Zi Yan's words the more reasonable he found them; it was just that he had always been possessed of a lofty pride, so much so that even though he only needed to pretend to demonstrate weakness in front of Wanyan Xu, his heart was ill at ease with such a notion. But if he did not show weakness, as Zi Yan rightly said, he could not escape from an even worse insult. Just as he was vacillating, a bright voice cheerily said: "What are you thinking of? You look totally lost in your own world. I [2] sent you out here because I wanted you to absorb some sunshine. The sun has now set but you are still lying here, are you deliberately trying to catch a cold? Even if you want to, I will not allow it; I have waited a long time for this day to come."

Raising his head, Su Yi found himself looking at Wanyan Xu's handsome smiling face, which was mere inches away from his own. Picking Su Yi up with his large hands, he laughed gleefully: "You have indeed put on some weight; this time you should allow me to have my way!"

Su Yi looked into Wanyan Xu's eyes, they resembled those of a starving wolf, as if he was about to devour Su Yi. Although Su Yi was unworldly with regards to the domains of lust and love, after having been harassed by Wanyan Xu for the past month, he could understand the hidden intentions behind such a gaze. He could not help but begin to panic, quickly getting a hold of himself, he calmly said: "Please put

me down for the moment, I have something I would like to say to you."

Su Yi's solemn tone held no traces of shame or embarrassment. This was so unlike his past behaviour that Wanyan Xu's curiosity was piqued. Setting Su Yi down, he said: "What do you wish to say? Don't tell me that you have acknowledged the inevitable, and want to profess your love to me?" After saying that, Wanyan Xu's face was filled with mirth; evidently he found the very thought rather ridiculous. Entering the bedchamber side by side with Su Yi, he commanded the palace maidservants to send up some tea and snacks. After they had seated themselves and were facing each other across the table, Wanyan Xu said: "Don't you have something to say? What are you dawdling for?"

Su Yi hesitated for a long while, thinking to himself: "If I have to grovel and beg to show submission, I would rather die. But if I don't, I'm worried that a bigger insult would be heaped upon me instead. Perhaps another tactic is worth a try, I could try telling him my true feelings although I have never been willing to admit to them. In all likelihood, my honest admiration is equivalent to weakness; he will certainly lose interest in me."

Having thought of such a solution, he said: "Wanyan Xu, the two of us were destined by heaven to be sworn enemies. From the day the late King died after losing the battle where I was the opposing commander, it has probably been a foregone conclusion. Now you have captured me and destroyed Great Qi, you can consider yourself to have avenged your father. Because my ancient country has met its end at your hands, I too, hate you to the core. Anyway, the grievances and animosity between us only grow, like a knot getting more binding as its ends are pulled. Su Yi is untalented, however what little ability I have can never be used to further the aims of the enemy that annihilated my country. Do you understand what I'm saying? I could never surrender to you. No matter what methods you choose to employ, they will fail; I advise you to give up any such ideas. But..."

Wanyan Xu was wearing a very proper expression on his face, pouring himself a cup of tea, he made no comment, only an "o" sound, keeping his thoughts to himself, he asked: "But what?"

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Looking at Wanyan Xu again, Su Yi finally made up his mind. In a low voice he said: "But... even after all that... but in my heart, I am still very... I admire you deeply." To express such thoughts was difficult for him; he had trouble articulating the words and was unable to say them without pauses. Wanyan Xu's eyebrows shot up, he shot Su Yi a look but Su Yi didn't dare to meet his eyes, afraid that he was going to be ridiculed.

Su Yi simply closed his eyes, took a deep breath and continued: "Since your ascension, your lands have been governed well. Despite your desire for revenge, you have shown good judgement in choosing to consolidate your power and not sending troops to contest the border for three years. Most people would not be able to show such restraint. To gather intelligence on the conditions of my troops, you infiltrated my encampment alone. No one expected that you would take such a big risk, even though I regarded you as my enemy I could not help but applaud your courage and resourcefulness. I have now been captured and brought to Jin Liao and I can see that although this is a bitterly cold land, its administration is neat and tidy, and the country is bustling and prosperous beyond compare. Only an enlightened Son of Heaven [1] could accomplish such deeds. Although I personally don't agree with your treatment of the death row convicts, I understand that you are trying to send your people the message that one should never lose hope and should never become despondent like a dog that has lost its master. Otherwise, Jin Liao's citizens would not have been able to recover so rapidly from the crushing blow of a heavy military defeat, rising like a phoenix from the ashes of adversity to become a strong country. I am grateful to you for not allowing your troops to harass the common people of my defeated country, I know you have your own selfish reasons for doing so, but it also shows the breadth of your vision. Su Yi deeply respects you, but I also have some fear of you. I don't know for a person such as yourself, the lengths you will go to before you are satisfied. Privately, I am thinking 'ah, if only the Great Qi also had a monarch such as you, perhaps her fate would have been different.' Wanyan Xu, every single word I've said has come from my heart. Do you understand? Even though I cannot yield to you, on the other hand neither do you

require my talents. Don't be vexed over your failure to make me submit anymore. You have long conquered me through your anger, after all, am I not your prisoner? If you can oblige me, and let my body follow the fate of my country, when Su Yi has reached the underworld, you will have his eternal gratitude.

He said these words in a rush. After finishing his long speech he lifted his eyes to look at Wanyan Xu, only to see that his face was expressionless. After a long pause, a hint of a smile began to show on the corners of his mouth, gradually spreading over his lips. Only then did Su Yi let loose a relieved sigh, thinking: he seems to be pleased with my words, most likely, he won't make things difficult for me anymore.

However, Wanyan Xu said: "it's rare that you would share your deepest thoughts, come over here, I [2] also have some heartfelt words I would like to tell you."

Su Yi couldn't help but feel that the situation had turned a bit surreal. He knew that once he had said his piece, he would be fated to accompany his country in her death. Wanyan Xu and him had many commonalities and could sympathize with each other, but an enemy is still an enemy. He would not surrender, and Wanyan Xu would not show mercy, nor should he show mercy. At this moment, he felt as if a heavy burden had been lifted off his shoulders; as long as Wanyan Xu had no more illusions about him, losing his life was nothing. The only regret he had was that he didn't die on the battlefield that day, to be buried forever under the swirling sands of the desert.

With lamentations in his heart, he rounded the table and walked step by step towards Wanyan Xu. Unexpectedly Wanyan Xu shot his hand out; Su Yi was caught unawares and could do nothing to prevent himself from tumbling into Wanyan Xu's embrace. Greatly alarmed, he started to struggle but his waist had been encircled by arms as unyielding as steel bands; he found it impossible to free himself. Pressing their faces together, Wanyan Xu said: "Don't move, didn't I already say that I too have some heartfelt words to say to you?"

Su Yi said urgently: "You can speak your mind without holding me. I've said so much to you, was I wasting my breath?"

Wanyan Xu wore a smile while he caressed Su Yi's face: "How could that be? I've never known that you think of me that way in your heart. I am delighted to know this."

Ignoring Su Yi's attempts to get free, he clutched Su Yi even closer, sighing: "Su Su, you are a general, but you have never participated in palace intrigues. That's why you do not know, to be an emperor is very difficult, although they have the most exalted status on earth, but they hardly ever hear a word of truth. They may have absolute authority over all under heaven, but they will never know if there are any trustworthy people around them. The emperor is the loneliest person in the world. For the sake of his throne, and his realm, he has to expend a lot of energy and thought. The wiser the emperor, the more pitiable he is. I am no different, I have many pampered concubines and favoured officials around me but I still feel as lonesome as an unmarried man without a family. They excel at telling me words that are sweet to my ears, but I don't know which words have even an ounce of truth. When they are fearful, they dare not say it. When they hate, they dare not say so. Before me, their eyes will always be unclear, misted over with a layer of fog. Even I find it difficult to see their true intentions clearly. But Su Su, you are different from them. Your eyes are so limpid, as clear as a pure mountain spring, by just looking at them a moment I can tell your true feelings. After listening a while to you, I can tell if you are speaking the truth. Su Su, I'm very happy, and I've suddenly come to realize, it seems like I don't hate you anymore, not even a little. My heart feels very warm now."

Right after he said this, he intimately gave Su Yi's earlobe a light nibble and with a hint of quiet laughter in his voice said: "What shall we do? I want you, not because I want to conquer you, not because of any other reasons, I just want you. There is still some daylight left, but I cannot wait. Su Su let's not bother with these matters anymore, alright?"

Su Yi's reaction was one of extreme fright, so horrified that his soul was close to flying off. His only intention in baring his innermost thoughts to Wanyan Xu was to make him understand that actually, this prisoner in front of him deeply respected him and there was really no need for him to tax his mind and body to think of ways to force

Su Yi's submission. Professing admiration could be counted as showing weakness, but was not as dishonourable as grovelling and begging. He never expected to shoot himself in the foot, with the result that the situation had become even more out-of-control. Before the wholly startled Su Yi could make a sound, Wanyan Xu was already carrying him towards the enormous bed that lay in the heart of the bedchamber.

War Prisoner Chapter 18

Su Yi immediately began to struggle; his physical condition was now miles removed from what it had been during the period of time he was being tortured. After he gave Wanyan Xu a few hard punches, Wanyan Xu actually found that he was unable to keep a good hold of Su Yi, almost dropping him down. He heaved a disgruntled sigh and said: "I [1] didn't think that allowing your body to recuperate would have such an unpleasant consequence." As he was speaking, he set Su Yi down. Wanyan Xu's eyes were bright and glittering and he was resolved that today would be the day he would finally savour this delightful morsel.

Su Yi's anxiety didn't subside. Although his body was much healthier than before, he was still nowhere as hale and hearty as Wanyan Xu. Su Yi could only increase his guard, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on Wanyan Xu, he did not even dare to blink, for fear that the enemy would be able to take advantage of any small opening to press his advantage.

Just as the two were deadlocked, a sweet and gentle voice was heard from outside the door: "Your Majesty, Zi Yan begs an audience."

Su Yi could finally relax and heaved a big sigh, he knew that Zi Yan had deliberately interrupted so that Wanyan Xu could not get intimate with Su Yi; her arrival was fortunate indeed, rescuing Su Yi from a sticky situation. From Wanyan Xu's perspective however, he had been interrupted just as the fun was beginning. Displeasure was written all over his face. However, he was a conscientious monarch at his core; he never allowed his whims to dictate his actions. He had no choice but

to let this opportunity slip, and said glumly: "What is it?"

Seeing that Wanyan Xu would rather leave the room than allow her entry, and was not bothering to hide his extreme irritation, Zi Yan hurried to reply: " Reporting to your Majesty, General Yu Cang is leading his victorious army back to court, the letter that was just delivered says he has reached the Wang Jing Pavilion five li [2] outside the capital."

After hearing these words, the stormy expression on Wanyan Xu's face finally cleared up, and he said genially: "He has returned? That's wonderful! Send down my edict, all civil and military officials above the fourth grade will accompany me to the Triumphant Pavilion ten li outside the city to welcome General Yu."

Su Yi saw that his spirits had become jubilant in the blink of an eye, all because Yu Cang had achieved great merit by destroying Qi. Upon the reminder that his ancient country had now been destroyed and his countrymen and himself were now reduced to being rudderless people that belonged to no state, grief overtook his heart. Suddenly weak-kneed, he sat heavily on the bed just behind him. Balling up his fists, he forced himself to restrain his tears, unwilling to lose his poise in front of Wanyan Xu.

Wanyan Xu turned back to look at him, walking to Su Yi, he enfolded him in an embrace. Su Yi was startled and immediately tried to break free, only to hear Wanyan Xu say softly: "Don't think so much, I will regard the citizens of Great Qi as my own people. If you are not willing to remain here, and miss your own country, I promise you, I will eventually show you how to fulfill your wish. If you feel like crying, perhaps it would be best to just cry. Burying your distress in your heart, it would be sad if you should fall ill." Rising, he smiled and said: "My timing is bad today, you have managed to escape. But I will eventually savour this flavour, in the meantime, you should take care of your health well." Wearing a big smile, with long strides, he left.

Su Yi stared blankly at his retreating figure, unable to believe that those words, which could be considered gentle, had passed from the lips of this man, who was the

ruler of an enemy nation. Thinking back, he was struck by a distressing thought: he has captured me, destroyed the Great Qi, he has been granted his wishes. Under such joyous circumstances, he would inevitably be in high spirits and say these lovely things to demonstrate his generosity and broad-mindedness. If I take them to heart, I will be a fool.

Before he could finish sorting through his thoughts, he heard the sound of the door opening. Looking up, he saw Zi Yan hastily approach, saying in a low voice: "General Su, didn't you do as I told you?"

Su Yi coldly replied: "I did just as you suggested, and caused this sorry state of affairs. Miss Zi Yan, don't tell me your intentions don't match your words, were you trying to help your king in his efforts to make me surrender?" Thinking of how hard he had worked to struggle past all his misgivings to say those heart-felt words that he never thought would pass his lips, with the only result being that he had managed to bring upon greater disaster, he felt flames of anger burning in his gut.

Zi Yan hesitated, almost as if speaking to herself, she said: "no, even though I would never dare to say that I understand his Majesty's temperament very well, but I do have some knowledge of it. He usually hates craven weaklings, if you had done as I suggested, he would no longer have any reason to be interested in you. What has slipped through the cracks, why has the plan backfired instead?"

Su Yi replied: "How would I know, but if Miss truly wants to take revenge, I'll teach you an effective and satisfying method."

Zi Yan raised her head and looked at him suspiciously, only to hear him say succinctly: "If you kill me, you will have avenged your brother, and I will no longer have proximity to your king. Does that not remove all your worries?" So saying, he smoothly pulled out the dagger Zi Yan wore at her waist. His starry eyes were filled with determination as he said to her: "What are you hesitating for? If you don't seize this chance, you may never be able to take revenge."

Zi Yan's eyes were flashing as she looked at him, and suddenly said: "General, your

country has been destroyed; I can understand your desire to die along with her. But I don't understand why you refuse to die by your own hand, why do you need Zi Yan to end your life instead? Does the General lack the courage to meet death?"

Surprisingly, Su Yi gave a sad chuckle and said: "If I should have the freedom to decide my own life or death, I couldn't be more delighted. But your king is using the lives of the citizens and captured troops of the Great Qi as a means of controlling me. Does Miss understand my difficulties now? If I die by Miss's hands, he would have no reason to vent his rage on the captured soldiers and citizens of the Great Qi. You are his favoured attendant; he will not take his anger out on you for the sake of a lowly prisoner of war such as me. Although the animosity between Miss and I is as deep as the ocean, I know that you have an upright character. Su Yi only hopes that after his death, you will often advise your king to treat the people of Great Qi kindly. Su Yi will be sincerely grateful for your benevolence in the underworld."

Zi Yan's gaze suddenly grew warm, taking the dagger, she said softly: "General Su can be reassured. Although Zi Yan does not dare to guarantee anything, but if his Majesty decides to vent his rage on your people and soldiers, Zi Yan will do her utmost to dissuade him." She reached out for the dagger, clearly articulating each word, she asked: "The General has really decided on this course?" Su Yi did not reply, slowly closing his eyes, wearing a beatific smile upon his face.

War Prisoner Chapter 19

Watching Su Yi face death with equanimity, Zi Yan could not help but feel respect. Zi Yan was highly skilled in martial arts, her swordplay was masterful, and in addition, Su Yi was putting up no resistance. Hence she said: "The only thing I can do for you now, is to give you a clean and fast death. General, please don't mind me." The dagger flashed like lightning, about to accomplish its goal - the skin of Su Yi's neck had been pierced and a trace of blood was seeping out – when a panicky voice rang out: "Zi Yan, what are you doing?"

Zi Yan hurriedly put the dagger away, turning back to be met with the sight of a

horrified Zi Liu standing at the door. Heaving a sigh for her efforts had all gone to naught, before saying smilingly: "General Su pleaded long and hard for me to fulfil his wish, I can't bear to see him suffer such a great calamity so I wanted to release him from his predicament. I didn't expect you to show up."

Zi Liu gave a long exhale, and said sternly: "You are too reckless; there will be trouble if his Majesty finds out about this. You are normally an intelligent person, but you have committed a very foolish deed today."

Addressing Su Yi she said: "Your humble servant understands General Su's feelings. Although you may say that life and death are merely two words, they still merit careful consideration. Even if you succeed in securing release for yourself, involving others would bring trouble upon them, could you really stand for that? Between heaven and earth, those who demonstrate the most courage are not those who seek death, but are those who have the mettle to rise from the most arduous adversity. As long as you are alive, there is still a sliver of hope that you could one day recover the hills and rivers of your country; that is the attitude a real man should have." Having said that, she pulled at Zi Yan and said: "Let's go, his Majesty's procession to welcome General Yu is about to depart, we will be late if we don't hurry."

After they had left, Su Yi slumped on to the bed in disappointment. Looking out the window, he could see that the sun had long set and the tranquil scene in the courtyard was now illuminated by moonlight. He thought to himself that Wanyan Xu must value this Yu Cang highly indeed, rushing off to welcome him back with no regards to the time of day. At the thought, he was reminded of the destruction of the Great Qi, and his own situation, where he had no path to life yet had no door to death. He felt like his heart had been submerged in a vat of boiling oil. Next he thought of Zi Liu's words. Although he knew that she hadn't carefully chosen her words before speaking, and had been only trying to dissuade him from seeking death, but somehow he still felt that a spark of hope had been kindled within him bringing with it a fresh surge of courage. With his emotions still turbulent, Su Yi lay down on the bed, and after tossing and turning for a while he managed to drift off into a light sleep. When he awoke, it was already the fourth watch of night [1].

The palace hall situated in front of the king's personal quarters was brightly lit, evidence that Wanyan Xu had already welcomed Yu Cang and was now holding a late-night banquet in his honour. Su Yi coldly looked in that direction, thinking of how the enemy that had vanquished his country was in there receiving congratulations from ten-thousand [2] people. Countless souls were being crushed under his iron heel; the hatred that Su Yi bore for the destruction of his country would not be so easily forgotten. Zi Liu was right, being a general of the Great Qi, he should not capriciously choose to die just so as to become a martyr for his country. That would be the act of a cowardly man; if he truly wanted to honour his country he should marshal all his resources and think of ways to restore the Great Qi. At these thoughts, he could not contain his emotions, which were roiling up like waves in his chest. He found paper and a writing brush; leaning over the table he finished writing in a continuous stroke. Upon reading what he had written, he found that he had composed a short poem [3].

A few beats of the night-watch drum, I am startled awake in the room, the candles have gone out, the dawn is cold. My dreams took me to Inner Mongolia, the sound of horses' hooves still ring in my ear. Autumn [4] has come and the geese are travelling south. I can no longer find a path back to my home, but my feelings remain. My wings have been broken, but my spirit is untamed.

My life-long wish, I have spent my youth pursuing, not realising that my hair has grayed. The sentimental moon still shines upon that destroyed country. An old acquaintance is before my eyes, but upon inspection I see that there is no will left in his heart. Looking back at the road I have travelled, I see that although I my clothes have become soiled, the lands remain unchanged.

Tossing the brush aside, he laughed grimly and said: "Wanyan Xu, if you have heaven's assistance, I will be not be able to escape and thus will be unable to plot revenge. If not, the grudge I bear against you for destroying my country and my imprisonment must be repaid in full." So saying, he peered out of the window and saw that a ray of sun had began showing in the east. He hurriedly pushed open the door and stepped out, but a few guards rushed forward to accost him, looking at him

with alert eyes. Their leader said: "The General has arisen early, shall we send for the palace maids to attend to you?" Although his language was polite, there was a trace of harshness in his tone; evidently he was afraid that if Su Yi managed to escape, the King would have him answer for his failure with his head.

Su Yi said with a smile: "I wish to take a short walk, I shall return shortly." Having said that, he began to leisurely stroll around the courtyard which was still misty with the fog of early dawn. The guard leader, together with a few of his men, followed him closely. The sun quickly rose in the sky; looking up, Su Yi saw a sheet of azure, it was a fine day indeed. Zi Nong's soft and gentle voice was suddenly heard: "General Su, General Su." Su Yi turned around hurriedly, to see Zi Nong emerging from the room. She smilingly said: "Where are you going, his Majesty will be arriving in a little bit. He said that he has neglected you for a whole night, and he feels very apologetic about it." So saying, she hid her face behind her sleeve to hide her chuckles.

Before Su Yi's face could even assume an unhappy expression, Wanyan Xu's voice rang out and Su Yi suddenly felt weightless, because he had been lifted by a pair of strong arms. Wanyan Xu gave his earlobe a soft kiss, saying with a smile: "Did you have an uncomfortable night? Were you thinking too much again? What am I [5] asking this for, with your character... aii... But the purpose of my visit today is to give you some good news. You still miss the Great Qi, right? How about I allow you to fulfil your wish? How will you reward me for this?"

Su Yi was greatly shocked, wondering in his heart: would Wanyan Xu really let him go? The two people had entered the room; Su Yi cast his gaze around saw that the poem he had penned was nowhere in sight. With haste, he struggled to free his body and said: "You... what did you say? You... You're willing to release me and let me return to the Great Qi?"

War Prisoner Chapter 20

Wanyan Xu's eyes also widened, after a long pause he gave a sneer: "You're mad, how could I [1] possibly let u go? Su Su, it seems like you still harbour evil intentions,

I must strengthen the quality of the guards watching over you.”

The phrase "Su Su" really infuriated Su Yi. When this term of address had been used before, the situation had been so urgent that he had been too busy to quibble over minor details. Now, he found the sound extremely piercing to his ears. Especially since, from the way Wanyan Xu looked, Su Yi couldn't be sure that he was actually older than Su Yi, but Wanyan Xu was certainly behaving as if he was [2]. Unable to keep his face from reddening with anger, Su Yi said: “If you are not willing to release me, what is the point of saying such words? Also, you are not allowed to address me like that. Bah! It is so disgusting I could die.”

Wanyan Xu wasn't offended in the least, he laughed and said: “Disgusting? Which of my actions don't you find disgusting anyway, what does a name matter? I said that I would let you return to the Great Qi, and that is true. No, that's not quite right, that land should no longer be called the Great Qi, it has now become part of the territories of my Jin Liao Royal Dynasty. Su Su, what I meant was that I intend to move the capital of Jin Liao Empire to the city that was originally the capital of the Great Qi, Dou Yan. Naturally, you would accompany me, isn't that also considered as returning to your country?”

Su Yi's jaw dropped, not daring to believe his ears, Wanyan Xu wanted to move his capital?! He said: “You... You must be joking? Moving the capital... that is not as easy as little children setting up a play house.”

Wanyan Xu beamed and said: “Of course I know that. But the lands of Jin Liao are barren, full of dry and cold deserts, so the people living here have a tough existence. The lands in the south are different. The land is fertile, capable of producing much fish and rice; it is a land of plenty. It is also a cultural melting pot, having assimilated the cultures of many different peoples, making it even more suitable to be the heart of my Jin Liao Royal Dynasty. After having given the matter careful consideration, I have decided that although moving the capital is difficult, it must be done because it will decide the fate of Jin Liao for thousands of seasons and generations. This is also the reason why I had to conquer the Great Qi.”

Su Yi had never expected Wanyan Xu to possess such foresight, this was the reason he had destroyed the Great Qi all along. Su Yi had always thought that his only motivation was to avenge his father's defeat, thinking back, that notion was faintly ridiculous. No wonder he refused to allow Yu Cang's troops to loot and pillage the lands of Qi during his military campaign, clearly he had long decided on his plans for the conquered country. Clasp[ing] the last thread of hope [3] he had to his chest, he peered at Wanyan Xu and said gravely: "Stop your wishful thinking, as the saying goes, it is hard to leave one's homeland. Would your courtiers be willing to do such a thing?"

Wanyan Xu gave a cold laugh and said: "On this matter, they will not have the leeway to object. I have already planned a countermeasure for dealing with such a situation. Officials who object to moving the capital and refuse to migrate will have all their property confiscated by the crown. Their luxurious mansions will be razed to the ground; if they move to a new residence, I will also have it burned down." Noticing that Su Yi was looking at him in dismay, he gave a bitter smile and said: "when one is trying to achieve an extraordinary goal, naturally, one must use extraordinary methods. This is a crucial time in our history; as courtiers of Jin Liao, they should endeavour to share their sovereign's burdens and not act only to satisfy their own desires." Wanyan Xu paused and glanced around, heaving a sigh, he continued: "Actually, what you said is true. It is indeed difficult to leave one's native land. I do not wish to leave this place either, to build this palace and forge this nation, my ancestors and I have expended much blood and energy. However, against the tide of history, these sentimental concerns must give way."

Su Yi had no reply, searching his heart for an honest answer, he clearly understood that what Wanyan Xu said was correct. This astute decision to move the capital only provided further proof that he was indeed an uncommonly wise Son of Heaven, the likes of which were rare throughout history. But for Su Yi, having his homeland invaded was already a bitter pill to swallow. Now, knowing that the invaders even wanted to use it as their capital, Su Yi's heart was even more pained. He could only conceal his true thoughts and said: "Anyway... anyway this is no small matter, you had better deliberate further before making a decision."

Wanyan Xu looked at him, and smilingly bantered: "Su Su, do you think that I don't know what's in your mind? You clearly know that moving the capital is a wise move but you are unable to resign yourself to having the capital of your country occupied by me. That's why your words lack conviction." He suddenly hugged Su Yi again before continuing: "But the tone you use when you speak reminds me of how ordinary married couples would discuss their matters in private. Although I have numerous concubines, not a single one of them would dare to speak to me in this manner. Their words are all meant to invite my love or to ingratiate themselves with me; they spend their time trying to come up with various schemes to gain my favour, all in the hopes of being crowned as my queen. What they do not know is that in my view, only a person such as you would be the ideal candidate to become my queen."

Su Yi nearly choked, unable to expel the breath of air trapped at the back of his throat. He couldn't figure out how things had come to this. Just a couple of days ago, the two of them were still sworn enemies that opposed each other with equal harshness. Even if Wanyan Xu did indeed have unnatural desires for Su Yi, it was not because he felt any affection for him; rather, they were born from an urge to conquer Su Yi. How was it possible that with only such minimal effort on Su Yi's part, Wanyan Xu was now regarding him as an ideal candidate for the position of Queen? Leaving the issue of Su Yi's gender aside, just the mixing together of so many unrelated issues was enough to give Su Yi a headache. Heavens, exactly what kind of person was he dealing with, this... these thoughts are impossible to guess at; no, he should say that these are thoughts that nobody should be able to think of.

Wanyan Xu watched with increasing amusement as Su Yi's delicate and pretty face flushed red with anger. He could not pinpoint the reason why, but ever since Su Yi had explained himself with such a serious demeanour, the more he observed and interacted with Su Yi, the more he felt that this erstwhile bitter foe was an outstanding character indeed. People of such quality could be said to be rare in heaven and unique on earth. Wanyan Xu was struck by another idea, gathering Su Yi in his arms, he said: "Obediently lie down with me for a while; I am a little tired from last night's festivities. If you refuse, I will gather all my resources to have you right now. Let's see if you can escape then."

Su Yi was so angry he could only speak through gritted teeth: "Could you sleep soundly under those conditions? Aren't you afraid that I will kill you in your sleep? My hands have long been stained with blood; I am more than capable of hardening my heart and killing you ruthlessly."

The threat did not seem to faze Wanyan Xu in the slightest, carrying Su Yi to the bed, he laid both of them down. Shutting his eyes, he said: "You are indeed capable of hardening your heart, but you are too pedantic, not willing to do despicable things such as striking when your enemy's back is turned. Su Su oh Su Su, you clearly know that this trait puts you at an disadvantage, but you are unable to change. I don't know whether I should mock you for being stupid or admire you for sticking to your principles. Well, you should lie down and have a rest too. Think over what I said, I wasn't just blowing hot air."

Su Yi was filled with doubts, thinking to himself: "He said so many things just now, how would I know which ones were meant to be serious? Most probably, it was the last few shameless lines about having me, the part about me being the best candidate for the position of his Queen was definitely not meant to be taken seriously. Both his ministers and he are not blind enough to mistake me for a female. Ever since ancient times, male concubines have been rare, needless to say, male queens are even more so." Looking at Wanyan Xu's even breathing, Su Yi didn't dare to move about, afraid that should he wake Wanyan Xu, Wanyan Xu was going to try to have him.

War Prisoner Chapter 21

Su Yi fretted all through the night, not even daring to move. Just as dawn was breaking, he finally managed to doze off. In contrast, Wanyan Xu slept soundly, waking up with his body and spirits refreshed. Looking at Su Yi who was lying by his side, Wanyan Xu could see that even in repose, Su Yi's brows were still tightly scrunched up, as if he was still on alert. A light laugh escaped from his lips, he thought to himself: *Is there really such a need to be so wary of me [1], with a person like you, only when the time is right and proper can I recklessly behave as I please. For now, I need to reign in my impulses. Only...*

Aii... I know that if I don't force you, you will not be willing to satisfy my wishes. Su Su, if it comes to that, don't blame me for being heartless. It's your fault for being so good, just a little taste has made me unable to extricate myself.

Seeing that Su Yi was unable to sleep peacefully, he quietly arose. Emerging from the bedchamber, with a wave of his hand, he indicated that the palace maids were not to go inside. Standing in the hall, he said: "Let your movements be light and soundless, I [2] don't want him to be startled awake. The shame of being captured, hatred over the destruction of his country, aii, he must have been enduring much torment these days."

Zi Nong covered her mouth to hide her smile and whispered to Zi Liu: "I have served our Master for a long time, but I have never known that he was such a kind man." Before she had finished, Wanyan Xu had already shot her a glare. Alarmed, she hurried over to help Wanyan Xu put on his dragon robe [3] while saying: "Your Majesty, are you going to make the announcement about moving the capital today? I'm afraid that the news would cause uproar in court."

Wanyan Xu's eyes grew cold and he said: "That doesn't matter, the capital must be moved sooner or later anyway." With a smile, he continued: "I've heard from Yu Cang that the Garden of Merriment in the Qi palace is extremely exquisite and opulent, almost as if it had been constructed by heavenly craftsmen. It will be a suitable residence [4] for the Empress."

Zi Liu said: "Does that mean that even though your Majesty has resisted naming a queen for years, you now have a candidate in mind? This is a momentous decision, not only must the choice suit your Majesty's wishes, but it would be best if the Crown Prince is in agreement as well. After the new queen has been crowned, she will have to assume the heavy responsibility of bringing up the Crown Prince. The average person would not be able to handle this requirement."

Wanyan Xu replied: "That won't be a problem; the new queen would certainly be able to guide Shuo Er well. That's enough, this is not an appropriate time to discuss such

matters, they can wait until we have moved to the new capital. It's time to attend court." So saying, he left with long strides, leaving Zi Liu and Zi Nong to look at each other in dismay, neither of them sure of the intentions behind Wanyan Xu's words.

As expected, Wanyan Xu's decision caused the gathered courtiers to behave as if their lightning had erupted over their heads, rendering them totally dumbstruck. Only Yu Cang was in favour of this decision.

Leaving aside the scene in the court, which had erupted in a storm of discussion after the initial shock had worn off, Su Yi had woken up by now. Finding himself alone with Wanyan Xu nowhere in sight, Su Yi could finally relax. Although Su Yi was not usually religious, at this moment, he couldn't help but recite a prayer of thanks to Buddha. A clear and melodious voice was suddenly heard from beyond the door: "Don't rejoice too soon, premature celebrations are always followed by grief. A great general like you would surely know this principle."

Si Yi was startled and raised his head, only to see a small body leaning against the door while wearing a cold smile. The boy's face was soft and youthful, but the expression he was wearing was somewhat precocious, there was a trace of imperiousness and deviousness in it that was wholly unsuitable for one of such tender age. Of course, this little boy was none other than the Crown Prince, Wanyan Shuo. Su Yi had dined with him just a few days ago, but did not exchange many words with him on that occasion. His sudden appearance now startled Su Yi a little, looking around, he asked: "Why have you come here? Why are you alone?" Although he bitterly detested Wanyan Xu, he was unable to feel antipathy for such a small child. Instead, he actually felt a bit concerned. Knowing how complicated politics in the palace were, for the Crown Prince to wander around alone was dangerous; people who had ill intentions could easily seize the chance to harm or even murder him.

Wanyan Shuo swaggered into the room and seated himself. Noticing that the table was empty, he said with dissatisfaction: "Haven't you sent for breakfast? Hurry up and order the servants to start preparing it, but have some snacks sent up right now, I'm hungry."

Su Yi could not decide if he should laugh or cry as he watched his guest taking over his duties as the host [5]. The palace maids have long understood that they could not afford to offend this little demon king, and they scurried off to do his bidding. Su Yi finally got off the bed and began to wash up and get dressed. Completing his morning ablutions, he turned back and saw that Wanyan Shuo was watching him closely with a fierce look in his eyes. In his heart he thought: why do both the father and son use this type of gaze to look at people? But he could only ask helplessly: "What are you looking at? There isn't a flower on my face."

Wanyan Shuo assumed an earnest demeanor and said with a nod of his head: "It is precisely because there are no flowers that I'm looking. Those faces that are decorated with a lot of things painted on in rouge and power, I wouldn't spare them a single glance even if they begged me to." So saying, he propped up his chin on one of his small hands and said seriously: "I was thinking, if my Royal Father really has taken a liking to you, would I come to loathe you as much as I loathe all his concubines."

Su Yi was greatly shocked, in his heart, he again thought: like father like son indeed! Not satisfied unless they can say something startling, evidently this trait was common to both of them as well. Su Yi hurriedly put on a sombre expression and said: "You don't have to think about that, it is impossible. Your Royal Father is the most powerful man under the sun, he can have his pick. As the Crown Prince, you should be concerned with mastering statecraft and not spend all your time wandering around as you please, just to cause problems for the concubines responsible for your care."

Wanyan Shuo continued gazing at him steadily, as if he was unable to take his eyes off Su Yi. He suddenly burst out laughing and said: "no wonder my royal father has been captivated by you, there is really something interesting about you indeed. If I should master statecraft, wouldn't your dreams of restoring the Great Qi become even harder to realise? Are you really General Su Yi, who would rather choose death over surrender? How come you would spare so much consideration for the good of our Jin Liao? Ha ha ha."

Having been rebuked by Wanyan Shuo, Su Yi was so vexed that his face turned white. Turning away, he said: I don't know if you have learnt any of your royal father's methods of administering the country, but I can say with confidence that you have totally mastered his glib way of speaking." At this point, the meal was served. Wanyan Shuo hopped up on a chair and began to tuck in enthusiastically, taking in big mouthfuls of the food. With this reminder that Wanyan Shuo was still merely a child, Su Yi could not bear to drive him away. Su Yi was stewing in his anger when he heard a voice, which sounded pleasantly surprised, outside the door: "Su Su, Shuo Er, so the two of you are getting along well? Ha ha ha, very good, at least it takes care of one of my major worries."

War Prisoner Chapter 22

Su Yi was already in a bad mood, upon hearing Wanyan Xu's words he grew angrier, saying in a loud voice: "Which of your eyes saw us getting along well? Thanks to you, the two of us are mortal enemies. If you don't get along well that is only to be expected, why should you worry over it?"

Wanyan Xu chortled, but did not answer Su Yi, guessing that his all-too-guileless sweetheart must have been at a disadvantage when conversing with the devious Wanyan Shuo and had suffered a loss in the war of words. Patting his son on the head, as he expected, the boy rolled his eyes and said: "Imperial Father [1], I am still considering whether I will come to like him or not, but at least so far, I don't seem to detest him very much. He he, you are really resourceful, even this captive who prefers death over surrender is now considering the good of our Jin Liao." After saying that, he proceeded to tell Wanyan Xu of all that had just happened. Although this only increased Su Yi's ire, he was totally stumped and could only stay rooted at his spot, not knowing whether he should explain his words or not.

After Wanyan Shuo had finished his meal, he addressed Su Yi with a gleeful smile: "my Imperial Father has just made an earth-shattering announcement, his is probably still feeling tense, you should take good care of him. I have always been a discreet person, I won't stay here and get in the way." Turning to Wanyan Xu, he

said: "Imperial Father, I have seldom been this reasonable. When the time comes to move the capital, you have to remember to bring all the things I have specified on the list with us." Having said that, he gave a belch and swaggered out of the room.

Wanyan Xu could not help but laugh aloud, but Su Yi only looked coldly at him and said with disdain: "Like father like son indeed, your son is as irritating as you are."

Wanyan Xu replied with a smile: "You only say that because you are still angry that he got the better of you during your conversation. Do you really not think that Shuo Er is exceptionally intelligent and witty? Ever since his birth, he has been faced with adversity, he even lost his mother. But he has never caused me [2] excessive worry, when he ascends the throne in future, he will certainly be an outstanding monarch."

Su Yi did not speak, in his heart of hearts, he knew that what Wanyan Xu said was right. Although they were sworn enemies, Su Yi also could not help but be a little bit moved by the warm and familiar relationship between this father and son pair. It was especially remarkable considering that they were royalty.

Su Yi was lost in his musings when Wanyan Xu seated himself beside him. After instructing the palace maids to lay out another meal, he hugged Su Yi and said: "An auspicious date has been decided on for the movement of the capital, before long, you will return to your homeland. If you behave well, I can even let you meet up with your old friends. Su Su, are you happy?"

Su Yi gave a "humph" before saying: "I think I will be happier if you will allow me to meet up with my old friends even if I don't behave well." He heaved a sigh and looked out of the window, after staring blankly for a while, he said: "Mountains and rivers are eventually smashed to pieces and carried by the wind, one's lot is to float just like the duckweed quivers when the rain hits [3]. Wanyan Xu even if you allow me to meet my old friends, what does it change? The Great Qi is no longer the Great Qi. Even if we were to meet, the circumstances and people have changed; the reminder will only be cause for more sorrow."

Wanyan Xu didn't reply, his only response was to embrace the person in his bosom

even more tightly. Thinking of how he intended to resume pressuring Sui Yi once they had reached the former territories of the Great Qi, Wanyan Xu felt, more than ever, that he was being unfair to this man, who was already covered with the scars of his many tribulations. Fortunately, before he could ruminate further, their meal was served. After Su Yi and he had seated themselves at the table, Wanyan Xu forced a smile and said: "Alright, don't think so much. After I have moved the capital, I will release those prisoners of war and let them return home and be reunited with their families. They will each be awarded a plot of fertile farmland; no longer will they have to face the flames of battle, they can enjoy being surrounded by their family for the rest of their days. Wouldn't that be good?"

Su Yi was silent, after giving Wanyan Xu a few assessing glances, he huffed: "If that comes to pass, it would naturally be good. I shall be grateful to you on their behalf. But I wonder, what would be the price I have to pay for that?"

Unexpectedly, on hearing these words, Wanyan Xu began to stare at Su Yi in silent contemplation. Su Yi grew anxious under the scrutiny, worried that Wanyan Xu was devising some nefarious plan again. Thinking back, ever since his captivity, he had been through many trials. He had no fear of floggings and cruel punishment; what he feared were Wanyan Xu's improper, illogical and shameless desires, his declarations of affection which Su Yi was still uncertain were true or false and his practice of using Su Yi's countrymen as leverage to threaten Su Yi at the slightest provocation. He could not withstand even a single one of these three things. Su Yi was really afraid, he had already been so tormented that he was mentally and physically exhausted, he doubted if he could contend with any more of these ordeals now.

Su Yi was still feeling uneasy but he suddenly saw that Wanyan Xu was smiling and was standing up to pour a cup of wine for Su Yi. Pouring a cup for himself, Wanyan Xu said: "As for the price, it must naturally be paid in time, but it won't be now. When that day comes, I'm afraid that I would not even have to call in this little favour. In the end I will be the winner, because fortunately for me, I have control over all of Su Su's greatest weakness. If it wasn't so, things would not be so easy for me indeed."

Wanyan Xu's mien was entirely serious. Su Yi felt both frightened and surprised:

since Wanyan Xu had not made any lustful demands of Su Yi for the past two days, Su Yi had thought that he had gradually let go of such ideas, could it be that Su Yi had miscalculated? But if he had, then why didn't Wanyan Xu make any moves for the past two days? Moreover, the Great Qi had already become his possession, yet another jewel in his crown. Before long, he would even move his capital there. Su Yi's resistance was the only thing that had not gone according to Wanyan Xu's wishes, besides this fact, Su Yi could not see anything else about him that might have been worthy of Wanyan Xu's attentive ardour.

Wanyan Xu lifted Su Yi's hand, forcing him to raise his cup. After touching it with his own cup, Wanyan Xu said: "Thinking too much would not change anything. Savour the moment... As there is wine today, we shall get drunk today. Accompany me and drink your fill. Starting tomorrow, both of us will have to make preparations for the move of the capital, and in the future...ahh, In the future what kind of beastly appearance I will assume in your eyes is difficult to predict. After tonight, perhaps we will never again be able to share such an atmosphere. Su Su, my Su Su... You... you... aii..." his speech unfinished, he gave a long sigh, and drained his cup in a single gulp.

Su Yi saw that an unexpected trace of desolation had begun to cloud Wanyan Xu's face, albeit it was faint. Ever more suspicious, he also drained his cup and said coldly: "So you have become the one who has been wronged? I think you have become drunk even before you have started to drink." So saying, he pushed Wanyan Xu away and found himself a book to read. However, with his thoughts in a whirl, he was unable to concentrate on the book at all.

War Prisoner Chapter 23

For the country of Jin Liao, moving the capital was the most important thing that had ever happened since her founding. In comparison with the move of the capital, even the heavy defeats they had previously suffered when they had encroached on the Great Qi's territory now seemed trivial. During this period of time, the whole country was seething with excitement; heated discussions could be heard on every street

and every alley. Although the land of Jin Liao had a harsh climate and was barren, it was still considered home by many people and the citizens of Jin Liao were understandably reluctant to leave their native lands. Fortunately, Wanyan Xu had always governed the country well, his people had enough confidence in him that whatever popular dissent there was to his decision did not escalate to rebellious plots and conspiracies.

In the palace of Jin Liao, the square that was usually used for arms drills was now hosting tens of thousands of imperial troops, divided into ten major groups and neatly arrayed on the grounds. Smartly dressed in their full uniform, and standing proudly, they made for an awe-inspiring sight. When Wanyan Xu, in full military uniform, emerged from the palace with unhurried steps, a rousing cheer was immediately heard from the square.

As he walked on, he looked around at this palace, which had taken the efforts of several generations of his ancestors to build. Reigning in his nostalgia, at this moment, he felt great ambition. Turning away from the sight of this palace, he showed no hesitation as he mounted his horse and the eunuchs accompanying him immediately called out in loud voices: "Start the procession." The sound was drawn out, reverberating long and loud in the confines of the palace square.

As they travelled south, the climate grew conspicuously warmer, wildflowers with unknown names grew in abundance all along their road, enlivening the landscape as far as the eye could see. Wanyan Xu was no longer riding his horse; instead he had chosen to ride with Su Yi in his carriage, forcing Su Yi to converse with him on all sorts of random topics. This was an effort at distraction --- Wanyan Xu was afraid that since they had reached Su Yi's homeland, the familiar scenery would cause Su Yi even more anguish.

Of course, Su Yi knew nothing of Wanyan Xu's worries and had no appreciation for his kind consideration, only feeling extremely restless and gloomy. Su Yi tried to drive him away a few times, but Wanyan Xu steadfastly refused to leave. In the end, Su Yi simply declined to continue the conversation, shutting his eyes as if resting. Gradually, Wanyan Xu also grew silent.

Just as the sun was setting, by chance, they came upon a temporary imperial residence. This place had originally been used by the Qi Emperor as a leisure palace when he wanted to amuse himself away from the capital; therefore it had been constructed to be luxurious and gorgeous, sprawling over a large area of land. It was as good a place as any to be stationed for the night. Wanyan Xu reluctantly joined the Empress Dowager [1] and Imperial Concubines for the evening meal, before he hastily rushed over to Su Yi's quarters. Upon entering, his eyes were immediately drawn to the untouched meal laid out on the table, and his heart gave a "thump!" Feeling in his gut that something was wrong, he looked around for Su Yi, and found him sitting still before the window, staring blankly outside while cradling a cup of wine in his hands.

Wanyan Xu was about to approach, when Su Yi suddenly broke his reverie with a faint sigh and said slowly: "seeking and searching, cold and cheerless, miserable and grieving. The moment when warmth suddenly turns to chill, it is hardest to find rest. With two or three cups of weak wine, how could I withstand the harsh winds of night? [2]" Before his voice had faded, two clear streams of tears were winding their way down his cheeks.

Inexplicably, Wanyan Xu felt a pang of pain stab his heart. Su Yi was an exceptionally stalwart man; Wanyan Xu could not remember him weeping openly before. Although his heart was aching for Su Yi, he did not know how to console him, after all, he couldn't very well say: Su Su, since you are so sad, I [3] don't want the Great Qi anymore.

Su Yi raised his head, noticing that Wanyan Xu was behind him and staring at him entranced, he did not seem surprised. He turned back and resumed staring out the window. Wanyan Xu, thinking that Su Yi did not wish to acknowledge his presence at this moment, was about to turn and leave quietly when Su Yi suddenly said: "Years ago, when I first received orders to leave for my new post at the border, I passed by this palace on my way there but the military situation was urgent, and I had to hurry on. I could only spare this magnificent palace a couple of glances, but I thought to myself that when victory had been attained, I would take the same road back on my

return and properly tour this place. I never guessed that the situation would change so much; I have never once returned from my station at the border. Now that I'm back here, it is with a totally different status. Furthermore, the country has been ruined and the people lost, these lands have a new master now. Aii, the place has remained the same while people and circumstances have changed."

Wanyan Xu was experiencing a riot of mixed emotions in his heart, but he managed to say with difficulty: "It's late, you should turn in. If you can forget these troubles only if I force you to entertain me in bed, I would be happy to oblige. I have been restraining myself for so many days, it's getting uncomfortable."

At these words, all the worries and sorrows in Su Yi's heart were instantly replaced by anger but besides giving Wanyan Xu a fierce glare and a snort loaded with derision, Su Yi didn't have any other means of protest. Wanyan Xu saw that his embarrassment had turned to anger, and he was wearing an entirely different expression --- the dejection that had been written all over his face was now swept away. Laughing merrily, Wanyan Xu dragged Su Yi to bed, and said gently: "go to sleep, we still have to get up early tomorrow to continue our journey."

The party set out at sunrise and rested at sunset, all in all, this pattern continued for three months before they finally reached their destination --- Dou Yan, the city that was formerly the capital of the Great Qi. Wanyan Xu halted the accompanying troops; only Zi Nong, Zi Liu, Zi Nan and Zi Yan were allowed to accompany them further. He was riding his horse, while Su Yi was still in the carriage. Without fanfare, they entered the city. The streets were swarming with people, but none of them knew that they were now in the presence of their master --- the new monarch Wanyan Xu.

Looking out through the window of the carriage, Su Yi saw that the banners of Jin Liao were hung everywhere, and the soldiers stationed atop the city walls were garbed in the distinctive battle armour of Jin Liao. Standing tall and proud along the battlements, they were an impressive sight, but all Su Yi felt was a pang of searing pain in his chest.

Wanyan Xu came by the carriage, and as if seeking Su Yi's approval, he said: "Su

Su, as you can see, I have not harassed the people, nor have I forced them to adopt the dress and customs of Jin Liao. The city is flourishing more than ever, but it still looks the same, do you feel better now that you can see that your country is still familiar? Also, the people are happy and laughing as per normal, whatever pain they might feel as a result of their country's demise is so much lighter than yours. I am not bragging, but during the reign of the Qi Emperor, the people never enjoyed as much happiness and security as they do now. As the saying goes, the people are most important, the state is second, and the monarch is the least important. As long as the people can enjoy peace and prosperity, the specifics of who is on the Dragon Throne is not important. Is it really necessary for you to hate me so much?"

Su Yi ignored him, still focusing his attention on the scene playing out beyond his window. Wanyan Xu was not in the least bit discouraged, after chortling for a bit, he was about to brazenly resume singing his own praises when Su Yi turned to look at him seriously. Wanyan Xu had never before seen such a look in Su Yi's eyes and he couldn't help but feel anxious, not knowing what expressions Su Yi was going to employ this time to berate his unseemly behaviour of tooting his own horn. To his astonishment, Su Yi gave a slight smile, and said gently: "Thank you."

War Prisoner Chapter 24

The meaning of "extreme sorrow turns to joy [1]", the meaning of "sincerity splits open gold and stone", the meaning of "hard work pays off for the resolute man", Wanyan Xu thoroughly understood the meaning of all such expressions in a split second. He was almost bursting with joy, and instinctively felt that he should cover his face with smiles and squeeze out two tears to express how moved he was. But all he did was to stare blankly at Su Yi; he didn't do anything, because he was incapable of doing anything.

After an inordinately long time has passed, just when Su Yi was wondering if the man before him had been suddenly struck by dementia, Wanyan Xu finally extended his arm, which was trembling slightly, and made a few movements before grabbing Su Yi in a hug. The force of the embrace nearly strangled Su Yi, such was Wanyan

Xu's strength. Su Yi was alarmed but just as he was going to push away the man who was clinging to his body with a death grip, he heard Wanyan Xu whisper beside his ear, saying each word carefully: "Su Su, If I [2] can have you, I shall never want for anything else in my lifetime."

Su Yi was stunned, and abruptly halted all his movements. For some reason, this remark uttered at this time, did not arouse even a little of the usual humiliation in Su Yi. Instead he could only feel the truth of the statement resounding in each word. Sighing in his heart, he thought: although this man is the greatest enemy I shall have in this life, he is also a life-long close friend. Evidently, everything in this world cannot escape the words "fate makes playthings of men".

A little while later, when they came to the palace, they saw a crowd of palace administrators trot out from the gates. Stopping a short distance from Wanyan Xu, they knelt and a person near the front of the group said in a terrified manner: "Reporting to your Majesty, we had heard that your Majesty would arrive tomorrow, therefore we failed to travel out to receive your Majesty. Our crime is worthy of ten-thousand deaths, we request that your Majesty mete out punishment."

Wanyan Xu smiled amiably and said: "Please rise, I was impatient, and arrived ahead of schedule. Guarding this place with a skeleton crew must have been exhausting, there is no further need of reports. You have taken good care of this city, I have entered it in casual dress and I see that that the streets are bustling with activity even in normal circumstances. It has not been affected by the flames of war; this must be to your credit. You shall all be well rewarded."

After hearing these words, the gathered administrators could finally relax, and crowded around Wanyan Xu as an escort as he entered the palace. At this point, it was getting late. After they had their meal, they randomly selected an outlying building in the palace complex to serve as their resting place for the night, waiting for the arrival of all the concubines and important officials on the morrow before making further arrangements.

Jin Liao has just moved her capital to Dou Yan, this matter alone caused much

confusion and commotion. As the sovereign, Wanyan Xu did not have even a short moment of idleness, to the extent that he could not even visit Su Yi's quarters to pester him. His absence was a relief to Su Yi, and he could begin to relax. Although Su Yi still had the wish to escape, he was prevented from doing so because, for one, Wanyan Xu had assigned guards to keep a close watch on him. For another, he knew full well that even if he should succeed in effecting his own escape, he could not possibly rescue all the people of Great Qi. His greatest weakness having been mastered by Wanyan Xu, for him to escape from the devil's palm was as difficult as scaling the heavens.

On this day, after the morning meal the little Crown Prince Wanyan Shuo again leisurely barged into Su Yi's quarters. He only smiled at Su Yi mysteriously, and continued to smile until Su Yi was totally baffled by his behaviour. Only then did Wanyan Shuo deign to speak, saying casually: "You still have the mood to read here? Can't you see that the Garden of Merriment just opposite has already been repaired and is ready for use?"

Su Yi cast a glance outside the window; the pain in his heart was mixed with better resentment. It was to build this extravagantly luxurious palace that the Qi Emperor had diverted funds meant for the military, causing his troops to weaken and be easily defeated, and in effect, had directly led to outcome of having their country destroyed. Su Yi turned away, not bothering to engage with Wanyan Shuo, he only said with a heavy grunt: "It is the scourge that has caused the fall of a country, what is there to admire about it?"

Wanyan Shuo nodded and said: "Oh, of course, no wonder you are so angry, I've heard that your Emperor incited the wrath of Heaven and the complaints of the people to build it. He also reduced funding and provisions for the troops and thus doomed the country. He he, he expended so much thought and energy but it has been to our advantage. I wonder what he thinks of it now in the underworld?"

Su Yi said coldly: "Did you come here just to say this? If so, then I have heard what you have to say, so please leave."

Wanyan Shuo was not offended in the least, he laughed and said: "Of course not. Once the Garden of Merriment has been properly restored, my Royal Father will name a new Queen. Does that not worry you even a little?"

Su Yi raised his head and looked him in the eye. Smiling coldly, he said: "His naming a new queen has nothing to do with me. Why should I worry? Both you and your father don't make much sense when you speak."

Wanyan Shuo was so surprised that his eyes were bulging. "What? Did my Imperial father not even breathe a little hint of this to you? He is too close-lipped. Can it be that you truly do not know that the new Empress he intends to name is none other than you."

With a loud bang, the book that Su Yi was holding landed heavily on the table beside Wanyan Shuo. Su Yi's face and ears were flushed red, full of fury, he yelled: "You are a small child, and the crown prince of a country to boot, why do you not have any propriety in your speech? No doubt, I am a defeated enemy general; you can beat or kill me as you please. Your father uses the life of my people to threaten me and cause me to suffer humiliation. Is that not enough for the two of you, is there really a need to send a child like you to make fun of me? Although Su Yi has a compassionate heart, and is not willing to let his people suffer, I will not be cowed. If I am forced to the point where I have no way out except for death, no matter the reason, they will not be able to make me suffer on to live in this world."

Wanyan Shuo was neither afraid nor worried, he smiled and said: "I naturally have great respect for General Su Yi's moral integrity, but not even a single word I said was a lie, you will know this soon enough. If you can do as you said, and be willing to sacrifice the lives of your people, then no one can stop you if you choose to die. But I understand my Royal Father's temper best; he will really unleash a storm of bloody revenge, the likes of which you don't even dare to dream about. Well, we can wait and see what happens." He gave another cold laugh, and left.

War Prisoner Chapter 25

Su Yi slumped onto the bed in dejection. He could clearly recall Wanyan Xu's words to him on that night, but he had thought they were just idle musings and had not taken them to heart. Thinking back, could he have been perfectly serious? Thinking of this, he could not help but feel both shock and fear. He was shocked that Wanyan Xu would have the audacity to defy the world and name a male Empress. His fear stemmed from the possibility that should he refuse, Wanyan Xu might really unleash a storm of bloody vengeance upon his people. No matter how he thought over the matter, he could not see how he had even the slightest room for resistance. He heaved a long sigh, even after he endured much suffering and had found a way to cope with his humiliation to continue living without purpose, could it be that Heaven had still not finished testing him?

When night fell, the long-absent Wanyan Xu made an appearance at Su Yi's quarters, but his face was devoid of the high-spirits that usually coloured his expression. Su Yi looked at him coldly, noting that his expression was unusually solemn and there was a trace of anxiety deep in his eyes. With great apprehension in his heart, Su Yi slowly approached and sat down opposite him before saying grimly: "Do you have something to say to me?"

Wanyan Xu looked at him in surprise, which soon turned to relief. With a forced laugh, he said: "Shuo Er must have come by to give you a heads up. That's good, since he has told you, it saves me [1] the difficulty of having to search for words. Su Su, the feelings I have for you are even known to all the spirits and deities in heaven and earth, I would like to please you in every matter. But this issue is of great importance, although I know that you would rather suffer ten-thousand deaths before agreeing, it is beyond your control. I advise you to accept as soon as possible, if not, don't blame me for being ruthless!"

Su Yi was silent for a long time before saying sadly: "Don't tell me that you really intend to name me as your empress?" Although his heart already knew the answer, he still clung to a thread of optimism, hoping against hope that he would hear a different answer from Wanyan Xu's lips.

Wanyan Xu could not bear to see the spark of hope in Su Yi's eyes. Turning his head away, he hardened his heart and said through gritted teeth: "that's right, I want to crown you as my Empress. The Great Qi and Jin Liao will be united through our union, from now on we shall really be as a family."

Su Yi looked straight into his eyes and said in a trembling voice: "Wan Yan Xu, must you really humiliate me like this, this would only cause the people of Great Qi to mock me for lacking a backbone and rebuke me for selling out my country. I will not be able to walk on the streets without having to suffer jeers and people spitting on me. Would you be satisfied only when that happens?"

Wanyan Xu did not try to avoid his eyes, and said seriously: "My heart is as clear as water, with the sky, earth, sun and moon as witness. Our standpoints are different, if you insist that my sincere intentions are indeed so unbearable, I have nothing further to say. There will a very auspicious date three months later; I intend to hold a great ceremony to crown the empress on that day. You should start preparing from today."

Things had already gone too far, but contrary to expectations, Su Yi became serene. Looking at Wanyan Xu he gave a sad smile and said: "Alright, if you are determined to do this, I have no means of changing your mind. You can rest assured, I shall prepare well and you will surely be satisfied. But there is another matter I wish to discuss. Could you keep your promise to release my captured troops, let them return to their homes and spend the rest of their lives as farmers, safe in the bosom of their family?"

Wanyan Xu was stunned, he had never expected that Su Yi would agree so easily. When he had recovered his senses --- he was almost delirious with joy --- he took a few steps, hugged Su Yi tightly and said: "Su Yu, my good Su Su, since you have promised to be my official and rightful Empress, even if you made a hundred requests, or even a thousand requests, I will agree to them all. Needless to say, I will certainly keep my promise to release your soldiers." So saying, he turned to face the door and said: "Zi Nong, come in."

Zi Nong had been carefully listening to their conversation outside the room, hearing Wanyan Xu call for her, she hurried inside and said: "your Majesty, what are your instructions?"

Wanyan Xu smiled and said: "From now on, you do not have to follow at my side, you shall serve Su Su instead. Help him with all the arrangements for the coronation. I want to marry Su Su in a grand ceremony; I want the whole world to bear witness for us. I shall leave to make preparations now." Having said that, as quick as lightning, he planted a kiss on Su Yi's cheek. Then, with child-like joy and excitement, he left.

Zi Nong was also beaming with happiness, but when she turned and saw that Su Yi's face was pale, she hurried to advise him: "Young master, you do not have to be sad, your servant can tell that the love His Majesty has for you is real. Both of you can be considered unusually outstanding men; you can be a pair of confidants who are truly able to understand each other. If you can face adversity together and jointly share in good fortune, even if it is a case of two males loving each other, who will dare to say that yours is a union that is not blessed by the deities?"

Su Yi made no reply, after a long while he said: "Zi Nong, the set of silver armour I was wearing and the prized sword I was carrying when I was captured, do they still exist? Or have they been destroyed?"

Zi Nong replied: "No, the King commanded me to take good care of them. Why has General suddenly thought of them?"

Su Yi said with a forced smile: "Ever since my first military expedition, I have had the silver armour and prized sword with me. Now that I am no longer a General of the Great Qi, I have no further use for them. But they have been with me for a long time, they are such familiar objects that it is naturally a bit hard to part with them. I wish to have them with me for the next three months, after the great wedding ceremony, I will have them destroyed to symbolize that I have let go of my desire to die for my country. What do you think?"

Zi Nong did not think to question his words, smiling, she said: "Naturally, that would be good. Young Master, please wait for a while, I shall go to fetch them immediately." She turned and left. Su Yi absently watched her retreating back as if he was lost in thought; although he was wearing a gentle smile, there was an indescribable misery in his heart.

The days flew by and one-and-a-half months passed. Because Wanyan Xu was determined that Su Yi's first time would be on their wedding night, he did not harass him in the interim. Su Yi had made his own plans; on this day when the two of them were speaking together after having dinner, he asked: "Your promise to me about releasing my soldiers, how is it progressing?"

Wanyan Xu said cheerfully: "Would I dare to disregard Su Su's words? They were released long ago, but I have been caught up in too many matters and forgot to tell you. So what do you think? This time you should be happy and satisfied?"

Su Yi was silent for a long while before abruptly nodding. He said: "Very good, thank you."

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Su Yi had always been a self-possessed person, so even though his tone was clearly bleak, Wanyan Xu thought that that was only because he had thought of the destruction of his country again. He felt a deep pain in his heart and was unwilling to dwell on the matter himself, choosing instead to engage Su Yi in more idle chat. Su Yi continued wearing a blank expression; evidently he wasn't very interested in the conversation. Since Wanyan Xu had to attend court early the next morning, he said: "It's getting late, you should have a good rest. I [1] shall come to accompany you again tomorrow." Having said that, he left the room. To Zi Nong and the other palace maids who were waiting outside he said: "look after him well, I will reward all of you well in future." Zi Liu hurriedly draped a heavy cloak over him, while a few palace maidens and eunuchs prepared lanterns. They escorted him as he returned to his own residence.

Inside, Su Yi watched through the window as Wanyan Xu left; he kept looking until Wanyan Xu's silhouette had completely vanished. When Zi Nong noticed what Su Yi was doing, she could not help but laugh: "Young Master already misses our King? Let me go tell him, I guarantee that he will come back immediately, faster than the eagle flies. I'm afraid you do not know, but the reason the King is afraid to spend his nights here is because he's afraid that he wouldn't be able to control his desires. Ever since you have captured his heart, he hasn't visited his concubines, even those that were formerly favoured by him. He hasn't had an outlet for his desires for so long, naturally he doesn't dare to get too close to you."

Su Yi gave a bitter laugh and said in frustration: "You are a girl, but you can say such things, aren't you afraid of being ridiculed by others?"

Only then did Zi Nong feel that she had perhaps spoken a bit rashly. Her face reddened, but she gave a head a toss and said stubbornly: "It's not like that, our Jin Liao is not like Great Qi, we don't follow these antiquated rules. There is nothing wrong with talking a little bit about such things at times."

Su Yi smilingly said: "Yes, you are great indeed; I wonder who will be the luckless fellow who ends up marrying such a wilful wife. I wonder how you will torture him."

Zi Nong's face reddened further, stamping her foot, she said: "Young Master is still making fun of me, but what about you?" So saying, she turned and left. Su Yi waited for a long time, but she did not come back. He went out to have a look, but she was nowhere in sight, there were only a dozen or so palace maids who were whispering and joking amongst themselves. So he said: "I am feeling vexed and I wish for some quiet. All of you can leave; Zi Nong will be back soon, she can tend to me by herself." The palace maids hurried to comply. He waited until all of them have left before withdrawing back into the residence. He came to stand in front of a large cabinet, inside were his silver armour and prized sword. However, they were guarded by a large lock, the key to this lock was kept by Zi Nong and it never left her side. By doing so, she had hoped to prevent him from hurting himself, but she had not carefully considered this plan. Granted, the lock was big and heavy, but even so

it was hardly enough to stop Su Yi. Concentrating all his force on the palm of his hand, following a "pa" sound, the lock was broken.

Su Yi rapidly opened the cabinet door and took out his silver armour and prized sword. After stroking them for a bit, he suddenly shed the outermost layer of his clothes, replacing it with the silver armour. Grasping his prized sword carefully, he walked to the centre of the building and facing south, he knelt. With tears staining his cheeks, he said: "With the heavens as my witness, although Su Yi has fought many a campaign and participated in many battles, but I was ultimately unable to preserve these lands for my country. Now, the motherland has been destroyed. Su Yi has shamefully lived until this day, and cannot account to all those soldiers who have sacrificed their lives for our country. I can only beseech that Heaven can understand that I had my difficulties and allow Su Yi to accompany my country in death now."

After finishing his speech, Su Yi drew the sword out from its scabbard. The blade glittered like frost and snow, this old friend was as sharp as it had been in the past. Fearing that any further delays would bring upon misfortune, he did not hesitate and brought the blade to rest horizontally across his neck. In a moment, a man of firm and unyielding character would lose his life in the palace of his homeland.

A piercing shriek was suddenly heard: "Young Master, you must not do this!" Before the sentence was complete, like lightning, Zi Nong leapt through the windows into the room. In his fright, Su Yi tightened his grip on the blade and an inch long wound immediately bloomed on his neck. As it turned out, in her panic, Zi Nong was holding onto the sword point in a death grip. Her skill in martial arts was not lesser than Su Yi's, thus Su Yi was unable to cause further harm to himself.

Su Yi's heart was in great turmoil, he knew that if he should fail in killing himself, the consequences were going to be more terrible than he could bear to imagine. He tried to exert more force, but Zi Nong was also holding onto the sword as if for dear life, although blood was flowing freely from her palm to travel along the edge of the blade like a small stream, she did not flinch. She said urgently: "Young Master, please reconsider, it was your humble servant who let you have this silver armour and sword back, if you should use them to end your life, I will be in trouble." She knew

that Su Yi had a soft heart and deliberately chose these words to make an impression on him.

Su Yi did indeed have a moment of hesitation, but then he thought of the consequences of failure. Once Wanyan Xu found out about this, who knew what new methods he would use to threaten Su Yi? Besides, Wanyan Xu wanted to crown Su Yi as his Empress, when that time came, neither Heaven nor Earth would be able to prevent him from suffering a fate worse than death. With a new wave of determination, he gave a frustrated sigh and said: "Miss Zi Nong, Su Yi has been unworthy of your kindness, I can only repay you for this favour in the next lifetime." Having said that, his left hand moved like a flash of lightning, striking at a few of Zi Nong's acupoints [2]. Zi Nong was only concerned with preventing the blade from sinking into Su Yi's neck, and was totally unprepared to defend against Su Yi's attack, letting him achieve his goal.

Su Yi carefully extracted his prized sword from her hand; when he saw that her hand was still bleeding profusely, he hurriedly retrieved a white handkerchief from the head of the bed and began to wrap up her wounds. He said with guilt: "Su Yi would rather let Miss down before letting my country down. I must beg for Miss to understand my difficulties. Since you have suffered this injury, Wanyan Xu would not blame you for your failure." So saying, he bowed deeply to Zi Nong. Resolutely, he turned back to the table to retrieve the sword that he had placed there while he was tending to Zi Nong, but it was nowhere to be seen.

Su Yi's fright at this was extreme, he felt as if his heart had lodged itself in his throat in a single beat. In total disbelief, he turned to look at Zi Nong, but she was still standing motionless at the same spot. Instead, he heard a voice, as cold as the deep Northern forests, ring out from behind him: "Su Su, what you are looking for... is it this sword?"

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At the sound, Su Yi's heart, which had been lodged in his throat, now began to sink,

sinking straight into a bottomless abyss. Slowly, Su Yi turned and saw that Wanyan Xu was leaning heavily against the door, as if he lacked the strength to hold himself upright. His head was bowed and his eyes were fixed on the blood-stained sword. Although blood was still flowing from the wound on Su Yi's neck, and the handkerchief bandaging Zi Nong's hand had already been soaked through with blood, Wanyan Xu did not care to spare them a glance.

Su Yi was utterly silent, in these circumstances, he did not know what he should say. Enough time passed that Zi Nong was able to release her own acupoints, but like Su Yi, she made no further move. It was so quiet in the room that a pin dropping would have been heard. Wanyan Xu slowly raised his head to look at Su Yi, his eyes were filled with emotion, but they were indiscernible. Su Yi looked back at him steadily; if one were to look at Su Yi's eyes, one got the impression of a man who was set on his path and had no intention of turning back.

They stared at each other for a long time before Wanyan Xu suddenly started to laugh softly. Shaking his head he slowly said: "Su Su, you have such beautiful eyes, they are just as I [1] remembered from that night in the jail. So... So you have never changed, it is I who have changed... changed to become tender-hearted, changed to... so easily have... trusted you. When you promised to become my Empress, all you wanted was for me to release your soldiers... after that you can die as a martyr with no further worries... ha ha ha... What is laughable is that I actually fell for such an obvious lie, am I really Wanyan Xu? Zi Nong, what do you think, am I really the Jin Liao monarch that you have been serving for so long? Ha ha ha..."

Su Yi watched as Wanyan Xu continued to laugh maniacally, this laughter caused Su Yi to feel his own heart start to throb with pain but when he spoke, his voice was still hard and unyielding: "Wanyan Xu, since you have seen through and foiled my plan, I can have no complaints. But I can tell you that no matter what, as a man, I cannot become your Empress. Even more importantly, I can never become the male wife of the king of Jin Liao."

Wanyan Xu's laughter cut off abruptly and he stared at Su Yi with chilly eyes. Clearly articulating each word, he said: "My heart can be as hard as iron, you can try it out if

you don't believe me." After saying that, he looked at Zi Nong and said: "What are you still standing there stunned for, do you want him to have another chance at suicide?"

Zi Nong hastily sounded a reply, before coming to stand in front of Su Yi and saying in a low voice: "Young Master... please excuse Zi Nong's rudeness." So saying, she produced a strip of white silk and bound him up, stuffing another wad of thin white silk into his mouth before she helped him to lie on the bed. Su Yi did not bother to struggle, knowing that it would be futile. From the fact that Wanyan Xu was able to remove the prized sword from his side without Su Yi hearing or sensing his movements, Su Yi knew that Wanyan Xu's skill in martial arts greatly surpassed his own.

Wanyan Xu grunted, suddenly twisting his thumb and middle finger together. With a "zheng" sound, the prized sword which could pare gold and cut jade was broken into two sections by him. Tossing them aside, he rose and in a cold voice, gave Zi Nong instructions: "Find Zi Liu and have her tend to his wounds, the coronation ceremony for the Empress cannot be delayed. Everything that he might need to be ready, have it prepared."

Zi Nong cast a look at Su Yi, and said awkwardly: "But... But Young Master..."

Wanyan Xu gave her a look and said with a cold smile: "What are you worried about? Are you afraid that I cannot bring him under control? What a joke. Just do as I say." After saying this, he looked at Su Yi and said: "Do you really think that the only thing I could use to threaten you is the lives of your soldiers?" After saying that, he gave a couple more sinister laughs and turned to leave.

Looking at Wanyan Xu's eyes which were as cold as the winter frosts, and then hearing his laughs which were devoid of emotions, Su Yi's heart rapidly began to feel fear. But his soldiers had long been released and had scattered to the winds; he did not think Wanyan Xu could be able to capture all of them back, especially as he would have to do so one-by-one. In addition, he had just moved his capital to the former territories of Great Qi, and had to depend on the people to go about their

business as usual to maintain peace. To prove himself as a sagacious monarch, he certainly could not engage in a mass-slaughter of innocents. In fact, Su Yi had dared to attempt suicide only because he had taken these factors into account. Besides the lives of his soldiers and common people, he really could not think of anything else that Wanyan Xu could use as a bargaining chip against him but the expression he wore as he had left really made Su Yi supremely uneasy.

Su Yi lay there while his imagination ran wild, only dimly aware that Zi Liu had come to treat his wounds. She seemed to have prepared two batches of medicine for him, and had addressed many words to him, but Su Yi could not have told anyone of anything she had said because all her words went in one ear and out the next without registering in Su Yi's mind.

After Wanyan Xu had left Su Yi's residence, he immediately went to his study and sent for He Jian, the government minister in charge of the Ministry of Justice. At first, when he had heard from Zi Nong that Su Yi had gazed after him longingly when he departed, a feeling of sweetness had radiated through his heart, as if it had just ingested honey. Although he sent Zi Nong back without intending to return himself, in the end, he was unable to resist and had blissfully returned to Su Yi's residence himself, only to be met with that scene. Thinking of how he had trusted Su Yi, and the efforts he had made to please Su Yi every day, he felt as if his soul had been broken and his spirit wounded. A tumultuous mixture of rage and hatred swirled within him and when He Jian presented himself in the study, Wanyan Xu said harshly: "He Jian, receive my decree. I command that within three days, you must capture all the close friends and relatives of the war prisoner Su Yi that are living in Dou Yan. This includes all his old friends and close neighbours as well as their families, every single one of them must all be apprehended. If a single one is missing, you will answer with your life. Also, this whole operation must be carried out with utmost secrecy, so that there will be no unrest amongst the populace. Do you understand my intentions?"

He Jian after having been roused this late in the night and rushing post-haste to the Royal Study, had not expected that such a matter would be the cause of all this activity. Although he was puzzled, he could tell from the Emperor's face that

something was wrong so he certainly did not have the nerve to question him or offer consultation. After receiving the imperial decree, he obediently pledged to fulfil it and then promptly left to carry out his task. Some officials who had served the Great Qi were currently being detained in jail, when he had returned to his own residence, he immediately ordered people to bring them in for questioning. After they had listed all those people who had any close affiliation with Su Yi, on the second day, He Jian began the operation to capture them.

War Prisoner Chapter 28

Su Yi, still tied up, was confined to his room. Although he refused to eat, the attendants who brought him his meals did not try to force the issue. Three days passed like this, and he was feeling dizzy and seeing stars as a result of hunger. In his heart he thought: "if I can continue staying here without having to care about other matters, I won't mind starving to death." But every time he thought of how Wanyan Xu's eyes had cycled through a myriad of emotions before finally turning cold on that fateful night, his heart would begin to throb faintly with pain. Wedged in between was a sense of dread that innocent people would have to pay the price for his attempt at suicide.

On the fourth day, Zi Liu came by to apply a fresh coat of ointment to his wounds. Su Yi could not speak, and Zi Liu remained silent as well. When she had finished bandaging his wounds, she started to stand, but eventually chose to sit down again. She hesitated a while before suddenly speaking: "Young Master, please forgive Zi Liu for speaking out of turn... The matter about becoming the Empress, you should agree to it as fast as possible. You will have to agree sooner or later, so why put yourself through all this suffering?"

Su Yi sensed that there was a hidden meaning behind her words, and couldn't help looking at her inquisitively but Zi Liu was evidently unwilling to say any more. Su Yi gazed at her and suddenly shook his head. Zi Liu, having understood that he was refusing to compromise, gave a sigh and departed, leaving Su Yi alone to mull over his misgivings inwardly.

By the time afternoon rolled around, the weather had changed. Dark clouds were blanketing the sky and unusually for spring, strong gusts of wind had begun blowing from the north. Looking out through the window at the gloomy sky, Su Yi suddenly felt uneasy for reasons he could not explain. To him, the weather seemed to be an ominous portent of things to come. With a sudden "zhi ya" sound, the door opened and a few imperial bodyguards walked in. They did not speak as they approached and after making sure to support Su Yi's weight between them, they led him out. Since a wad of silk was still stuffed in Su Yi's mouth, he was obviously unable to ask any questions of them.

When they had reached the square used for arms drills, Su Yi saw Wanyan Xu seated on his dragon throne on a raised platform. Wanyan Xu smiled coldly when he saw Su Yi and with a wave of his hand, a palace maid approached Su Yi and removed the gag from his mouth. Su Yi had endured having his mouth forced open by the gag for three days, with the sudden removal of the silk handkerchief; he felt acute pain in his cheeks while his teeth and tongue felt numb. For the moment, he was unable to close his mouth. He saw that the palace maid had taken out a pair of braces used in dentistry and she now fitted them over his teeth. With a smile, she said: "the King has said, there will be a good show shortly and he's afraid that you will not be able to restrain yourself from biting your tongue."

The anxiety and fear in Su Yi's heart increased, when Wanyan Xu saw that his face had begun to betray traces of his horror and panic, he grew more pleased with himself. He knew Su Yi all too well. Neither the promise of torture nor personal profit had any chance of success with him, but he had a deadly weakness; that is, he was too soft-hearted. Wanyan Xu knew that he only had to exploit this single weakness for Su Yi to acquiesce to his demands.

The large square was totally empty save for Wanyan Xu, Su Yi and a few imperial bodyguards and palace maids. Su Yi was still trying to puzzle out what mischief Wanyan Xu was about to spring upon himself when he noticed that Zi Nong, Zi Liu, Zi Yan and Zi Nan were all absent. This only added to his bewilderment, he knew that these four females were Wanyan Xu's most trusted aides, at any given moment,

at least one of them would usually be on hand to serve him. Also, the little Crown Prince, who usually loved nothing more than to be in the thick of the action, was nowhere to be seen which only served to increase Su Yi's misgivings.

When Wanyan Xu saw that Su Yi's eyes were flickering back and forth as if he were searching for something, he immediately understood what was on his mind. With a faint smile he said: "Su Su, you are really strange. You are questioning why Shuo Er as well as Zi Nong and the rest of my [1] personal attendants are absent, correct? To tell you the truth, it is because the programme I have planned is really too cruel and I have no wish for them to witness it. Su Su, you must brace yourself for what's about to follow as well." With that, he casually clapped his hands a couple of times and a group of people in chains were prodded out from behind the platform by more than a dozen guards. The group comprised of both males and females, and people of all ages.

When Su Yi raised his head and took a look, his heart quaked in his chest. Before he could take a more careful look, a mournful wail was suddenly heard from the group: "Big Brother Su [2], save me... please save me..."

Su Yi staggered for a bit, ten-thousand thoughts could pass his mind but he would never have thought that Wanyan Xu would ever capture his all old friends and neighbours. The woman who had just called out was none other than the daughter of Uncle Wang, his neighbour of yore. They had played together since they were children. Although men and women should maintain a distance, their relationship was always close without being improper; even after she had gotten married, she still lived in the house behind Su Yi's. The two families maintained a very amiable relationship, only when Su Yi left for the border, did they lose touch with each other. Suddenly coming face to face with his old acquaintance at this time and place, Su Yi felt a million different feelings circulating within his heart that eventually crystallized into wrenching sorrow and dread. Loudly, he called out to Wanyan Xu: "What do you want? If you have guts, focus your attacks directly at me, why do you even not let off women and children?"

Wanyan Xu stood up in a leisurely fashion, he approached the group of hostages,

and while pacing by each and every one of them, he said slowly: “Su Su, you tricked me into releasing your soldiers, to recapture them would really be a troublesome matter. Besides, they should all be stout-hearted men like you; it wouldn't be very gratifying to torture them. But it is different for your old friends and their families, they live right here in the capital, capturing them was easy. Moreover, every one of them is timid and fearful, when the killing begins, I think their heart-rending screams of terror will be very affecting indeed.” So saying, he stopped right in front of an elderly madam. Turning back to look at Su Yi, he said smilingly: “I heard that this old lady has no sons or daughters, but you have been taking care of her as if she was your own mother. Even after you have been stationed at the border, every year you would entrust somebody with bringing her some money to help with her living expenses. Is that right? Such an old and useless thing, having her alive on this earth is nothing more than a burden. Why not let her go to the Heavens sooner, it also saves her from having to suffer on in this mortal coil.” So saying, he extended a hand back and a palace maid immediately stepped forward to place a Bull's Ear Sword into his hand. Wanyan Xu wore a chilling smile as he stroked the blade of the knife and he said cruelly: “Su Su, how about I disembowel her right in front of you today?”

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Su Yi's entire body started to tremble uncontrollably. Although he knew that Wanyan Xu was not incapable of being vicious and ruthless, he had never imagined that he would be merciless to this extent, totally devoid of any human feelings. Is this really the Wanyan Xu he had come to know? Su Yi looked at his eyes, which were cloudy with killing intent and the bloodthirsty smile hanging around the corners of his lips and he felt a chill rising up from the bottom of his feet, spreading throughout his body to freeze all his organs. His flesh, blood and tendons were similarly frozen and finally, he felt his very nerves start to ice over. He desperately tried to dash forward, but he was restrained by the guards who he could not struggle free of. He wanted to scream for Wanyan Xu to stop, but although his mouth was open no sound came out. His face was deathly pale and his body was bowed, like a bull that was trying with all its might to escape its restraints and struggle onward. He dragged his feet forward step by step, but was immediately pulled back in the next instant. His whole

person was enveloped with horror and tears were pouring down his face like a broken string of pearls. Before his eyes, Wanyan Xu slowly raised the sword, under the sunlight, the blade glinted with a cold gleam.

The old lady had already fainted, but two eunuchs propped her up between them. Wanyan Xu gave a chilling laugh and gripping the handle of the sword, began to bring it down slowly.

“Don’t...” An agonised shout erupted from Su Yi’s body, the sound rang out as if it had finally been unfettered from all the constraints put upon his body. Su Yi’s face was covered with tears, and he was calling out wildly in his hoarse voice: “Don’t... Wanyan Xu... I... I beg of you please... I beg you... let her go... she’s just a... just a pitiful elderly person...”

Wanyan Xu turned back, he was without any expression on his face, as if he were just a bystander enjoying a performance. Totally unruffled in the midst of such a scene, Wanyan Xu looked calmly upon Su Yi’s sorry figure. After some time, the corners of his mouth quirked up again in another smile and he said: “Don’t kill her? That’s right; after all she is already old, even if I [1] don’t kill her she doesn’t have many years of life left anyway. It is only a waste of my energy to kill her personally. Alright then, Su Su, let’s pick another one.” Again, he slowly walked along the line of prisoners, stopping in front of a girl who was about eight or nine years old.

“Su Su, I think you probably don’t recognise her? But actually, you once held her, back when she was celebrating her one-year birthday. I heard that she was crying uncontrollably and even her mother was unable to console her, but when she saw you her little face began to smile happily. Of course, you began to carry her and she spent her very first birthday cradled in your arms. I’ve said enough, I think you should know who she is by now.” Wanyan Xu did not even bother turning his head to look at Su Yi, almost as if he was speaking to himself, but he believed that Su Yi was paying rapt attention to every single word he was saying.

The little girl looked at Wanyan Xu with fear, and kept trying to duck backwards, as if she was trying to hide behind her mother’s body. A married woman [2] clutched her

shoulder tightly, and wretchedly entreated: "Great King, please let her off, she's still so young..." Even before she had finished speaking, the little girl had been dragged out of the line by Wanyan Xu who chillingly laughed and said: "She's young, that's why she's ideal. The one just now was too old, that's the only reason I stayed my hand. But this young one suits my purposes perfectly." So saying, he raised his knife but to everyone's surprise, the woman was able to scramble forward. Kneeling, she said: "Great King, please let her off, please let my child off." After saying that, she directed a despairing wail below the platform: "General Su, General Su, I beg you to please help us ask for mercy from the Great King. Shan Er is still young, on account of you having held her before, I beg you to ask the Great King to spare her life."

Hearing all these, Su Yi felt like his liver and intestines had been cut to pieces, he was in such pain. His body was already weak because he had been starving himself for a few days and now with the added stress, he was unable to continue standing. Utterly devastated, he knelt on the ground and cried in his hoarse voice: "Wanyan Xu, I beg you..." Abruptly, the other party turned his body to face Su Yi and said viciously: "Who do you think you are? Why should I spare someone just because you want me to? Humph, you are still tied up yourself, are you really in a position to help others beg for mercy?"

Su Yi had never felt himself to be so feeble before, even on the night where he had been forced to perform oral sex on Wanyan Xu, he had not been this weak. At this moment, he could not care much about other things. Still on his knees, he crawled forwards a few steps and started kowtowing to Wanyan Xu. While kowtowing, he cried and said: "I beg you to spare her, I will do whatever you want, please let this child off, she is still merely a youngster. I beg you... let her off."

Wanyan Xu saw that he was knocking his head against the ground, there was a distinct ring accompanying each knock and his forehead was soon covered with fresh blood. He couldn't stop his own body from giving a few trembles at the sight and had to take a few deep breaths to gather himself. After recovering himself, he said with the chilly tone he had been using all along: "You should be well aware of what it is that I want. Do you really need me to say it again?"

Stunned, Su Yi lifted his head and looked at Wanyan Xu blankly. Faced with Su Yi's obvious reluctance, Wanyan Xu grew even more callous, after laughing loudly, he said: "Actually, what you said is correct. I am the supreme ruler of Jin Liao, when I deign to use my blade, I should ensure that the results are extraordinary." He violently hauled a woman out from the assembled crowd of prisoners; she was none other than the woman who had initially called out to Su Yi for aid, his childhood playmate. With his gaze fixed upon her distended belly, he laughed sinisterly and said: "That's right, with a single sweep of my sword, two lives would end. That is indeed out of the ordinary. Su Su, I have agreed to your request to spare the life of the little girl, how about using this woman as a substitute instead?"

Su Yi gave a loud "ah" howl. Appalled, he tried to rush forward but he only managed to crawl a few steps before again being dragged back to his original position by the guards. He looked towards Wanyan Xu and saw that there was a gleam of excitement shining in his eyes that was unprecedented in its intensity. Wanyan Xu muttered: "This time, I won't let her go no matter what. Maybe when I make the cut an infant would emerge for me to toy with. Ha ha ha." Su Yi saw that the woman was in such fear that she had begun wailing and shrieking, between cries, she kept piteously calling out: "Big Brother Su save me... save me please." When he saw that Wanyan Xu's blade had already cut through her jacket, Su Yi could no longer withstand the pressure and called out in a miserable hiss: "Let her go... you let her go... I promise you... I'll promise you, alright?"

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Relieved, Wanyan Xu gave a long exhale but he did not relax his grip on the sword, not did the blade move even an inch away from the woman's jacket. Glacially, he asked: "What do you promise me [1]? Say it yourself for me to hear."

As if all his strength had been drained, Su Yi collapsed in a pile on the floor, gazing at the blade in Wanyan Xu's hand with a lifeless look in his eyes. His voice trembling uncontrollably, he said: "I promise to become your Empress... become your... Empress..." His voice gradually got softer as he spoke. Wanyan Xu was just

beginning to feel elated when he heard a "plop" sound. Turning back to look, he saw that the cause was Su Yi --- unable to cope with the trauma inflicted on both his body and spirits any longer, he had fainted even before finishing his speech.

Wanyan Xu's alarm was uncommon in its intensity, he hurriedly cast the sword aside and in a flash, he was by Su Yi's side. Gathering Su Yi's limp body in his arms, he could only sigh in relief after he had ascertained for himself that Su Yi's breathing was even and steady. Openly displaying affection towards the man lying in his arms, he carefully wiped away the blood that had stained Su Yi's forehead. When he saw that the wound on Su Yi's neck had also split open and was dripping blood, he hurriedly sent for Zi Liu and said: "Quickly, bring him to the residence and attend to his wounds carefully, aii, I had become muddle-headed in my haste, I should have waited until he had recovered before extracting his promise."

Zi Liu approached and examined Su Yi's wounds carefully before saying: "Your Majesty, please do not worry, his wounds are not serious." Having said that, she called a few eunuchs over and had them bring a long bench. They lifted Su Yi onto it and then, together with Zi Nong, they hastily departed. A curious thing took place, the crowd of people who had been held as hostages ran over, and a lively discussion ensued with many asking: "How is Big Brother Su? Did he faint? Will he be alright?"

Wanyan Xu stood up, his face had long since lost the fierce and merciless expression it had been wearing and said warmly: "All of you can relax, he will soon be my Empress, I am more concerned about him than all of you." The pregnant lady suddenly stepped forward, gazing at Wanyan Xu with luminous eyes, she said: "Will you treat him very well? If not, we will have forced him on the road to ruin. Our conscience will not rest easy in that case and we will surely curse you to come to a nasty end."

Beside her, somebody immediately shouted: "You are too brazen, how dare you be so rude to the Emperor?" Wanyan Xu only smiled, waved his hand a few times and said: "Madam, I've gone to so much trouble just so as to crown an Empress, it is certainly not because I wish for him to suffer. You can be assured, after Su Su becomes my Empress, Jin Liao and Great Qi will be as one family. I will not favour

the people of my ethnicity and oppress the people of the Great Qi."

At this, that young lady finally nodded and said: "If you haven't already shown that to be true, we would not have been able to make peace with our conscience and colluded with you to deceive Big Brother Su. You have already given us your promise that you will treat Big Brother Su well, a monarch should never go back on his words, so you must do as you promised." So saying, she raised her hand and said: "Alright, you have also promised us a reward for putting on a performance, so please do pay up now."

Wanyan Xu turned his head and called out to Zi Nan to go fetch silver pieces, only for Zi Nan to say: "Your Majesty, it would be better to wait. Zi Nong is the one who is in charge of all money matters, but she has gone with Zi Liu to attend to General Su." Before she had finished, Wanyan Xu interrupted: "What does that matter; you can pay for it first. When Zi Nong has some free time, you can report it to her and be reimbursed. I know you can produce the silver required now." After saying that, he told the "hostages": "All of you should follow her."

Zi Nan left in frustration. Wanyan Xu was finally able to wipe off the cold sweat that had gathered on his brow. A smile brightened his face and he said: "This approach was really effective, ah Su Su, I really did not misjudge you." Before his voice faded, he could hear his son's voice ringing out from behind him: "Humph, you should not be so happy. Although he has promised to become your Empress against his own wishes, since you used this method to compel him, he must hate you in his heart. In addition, I know that you will never tell him the truth. But even if you should tell him, he probably will not believe you. If I were in his position, I definitely would not believe you."

Wanyan Xu laughed bitterly for a while before sentimentally saying: "So what if it is love, so what if it is hate, as long as he has me in his heart, and will never forget about me, that is enough. In his heart, he has seen me as his enemy from the start."

Wanyan Shuo nodded his head, with a thoughtful look on his face he said: "So it is like this. If one cannot make their beloved love them, then they should make that

person hate them. No matter what they must not remain indifferent to you and forget all about you after the passing of a few years. Am I correct? Imperial Father."

Wanyan Xu was just about to reply in the affirmative, when his mind suddenly became capable of rational thought again. He scolded Wanyan Shuo: "'What can you understand at such a young age? All you are interested in is matters like this, quickly go and attend to your lessons! If I ask the Imperial Tutor and find out that you have not improved in your studies, see how I shall punish you!" After hearing what Wanyan Xu had to say, Wanyan Shuo stuck his tongue out before swiftly scampering off. At this juncture, Wanyan Xu rushed over to the palace where Su Yi was residing.

Once he was in Su Yi's bedroom, he saw Zi Liu and Zi Nong crowding around Su Yi. His wounds had already been properly cleaned and bandaged, but he was still unconscious. Upon Wanyan Xu's arrival, the palace maids tactfully withdrew to the side of the room and Wanyan Xu seated himself besides Su Yi. Turning his head, he asked Zi Nong: "Were the imperial kitchens instructed to prepare more nourishing foods?"

Zi Nong answered: "your Majesty need not be concerned about that, your humble servant has already given them such instructions." Wanyan Xu nodded and said: "previously, I let him starve to weaken his willpower, so that when coupled with that performance we put on it would be easier to make him comply. I had no better alternative, if he had really been able to harden his heart and ignore the plight of those people, I really would have run out of options in dealing with him. But nobody is to breathe a word of the truth to him. Aii, I can accept that he hates me, but I will not accept that he doubts me." After saying that, he noticed that Su Yi's long eyelashes were beginning to flutter and he knew that Su Yi would soon wake. He spoke no further on that matter but said to Zi Nong: "Instruct the cooks to prepare his meal, remember, he should be restricted to plainer food for a while. His food needs to be suitable for someone who has not eaten for a few days." Zi Nong agreed and left to convey his instructions to the imperial kitchen.

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Thus, when Su Yi opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was Wanyan Xu peering at him with worry written all over his face. In his eyes, Su Yi could see the depth of his affections, but when Wanyan Xu realised that Su Yi had opened his eyes, he quickly schooled his expression to appear neutral. A pang of pain struck his heart, and Su Yi shut his eyes again, in a cold voice that did not betray his feelings, he said: "Why have you come here? You have already got what you desired, in the end I was forced to agree to be your... Don't tell me you want to force me to say it again, and have my heart drip a few more drops of blood before you are satisfied? Or is it that when I knelt down before the stage and begged you just a while ago, it made you feel very happy and you have come here to enjoy the sight of me weak and powerless?"

Wanyan Xu's heart was aching, but his face was expressionless when he said: "Since matters have come to this, you can think what you like as long as you obediently worship Heaven and Earth [2] with me and complete the Empress Coronation ceremony that will be held in one-and-a-half months." *After that I shall have all the time in the world to make you understand my true feelings for you.* He did not say the last sentence aloud, instead, after giving Zi Liu and Zi Nong some instructions he stood up and left.

Su Yi looked after him with hard eyes as Wanyan Xu's silhouette gradually disappeared, at this moment he was utterly disappointed in him. He had originally thought that although they had been destined to be enemies through an accident of birth, but nevertheless, the two of them could be considered confidants. Instead, Wanyan Xu had employed such a despicable method when he was trying to compel Su Yi to be his Empress. Scene by scene, he recalled what had transpired earlier that day on the stage. Bitterly, it occurred to him that not even a beast would be capable of such abominable actions, which were worthy of the condemnation of Heaven itself.

"Wanyan Xu, I was wrong about you, I was really... wrong about you." Su Yi tearfully mumbled, as he contemplated how he could face the coronation ceremony, only

one-and-a-half months away. He is a man, but he would soon be forced to assume a role that was reserved, by tradition and history, for a female; such a humiliation would be difficult to bear. He would rather die than to suffer the disgrace of becoming another man's wife, Su Yi genuinely doubted if he could sustain his spirits and live to see that day.

Witnessing Su Yi's anguish, Zi Nong's heart was distressed and she almost blurted out the truth but was stopped by Zi Liu looking at her meaningfully. A little while later, when a few palace maids arrived bearing large boxes, Zi Nong said while smiling: "Young Master, please have your meal." Su Yi's brows were furrowed, and he gave every indication that he was unwilling to eat. Zi Nong was anxious and said: "Those people are still being detained in jail, if Young Master eats well, they will also be served excellent food and drink. If Young Master chooses not to eat, similarly, not a drop of water or rice will pass their lips..." Before she had finished speaking, she was interrupted by Su Yi. Zi Nong had never seen him like this; his eyes were filled with agony, and his voice sounded choked when he said: "Miss Zi Nong, I beg you... beg you to please say no more, I will eat."

Zi Nong's heart paused for a beat; she saw that although Su Yi had hastily picked up a bowl of porridge and was consuming it in big spoonfuls, his eyes were filled with tears that he kept from spilling through sheer stubbornness.

Zi Nong ached when she saw how distraught Su Yi was, and she almost blurted out: *Young Master don't be so sad, those people have already gone home after being rewarded with some silver. Actually what you witnessed this afternoon was merely a performance put on by his Majesty with their full cooperation. Not only did the Emperor confer on them many rewards, he also promised that as long as you are his Empress, he will never allow the people of Jin Liao to bully the people of Qi, nor will they enjoy higher status just because of their ethnicity. They only agreed to help his Majesty deceived you because of these promises.*

Luckily, Zi Liu was by her side. When she saw that Zi Nong was obviously feeling conflicted, she hurriedly said: "go to the kitchen and check if the Bird's Nest Soup is being stewed, if not, you should prompt them to finish preparing it quickly." Thus, she

managed to get Zi Nong out of the room.

Although Su Yi was consuming the porridge and soup with big mouthfuls, he had absolutely no appetite, to the extent that he had no sensation of being hungry or full. Luckily, Zi Liu was a conscientious attendant. When she saw that although the food laid out on the table had been lessened by half, Su Yi was still mechanically clutching the bowl of porridge and his face was becoming faintly discoloured, she quickly said: "Young Master should be full by now, you need not finish all these dishes. If you are really hungry, there will be a special type of Bird's Nest Soup served at midnight. It is a delicacy that has been stewed over a small flame for many hours, and would be very beneficial in helping your body recover from the wounds you have sustained." At this, Su Yi put down his bowl.

From then on, Su Yi became just like a block of wood, every single word he spoke and every action he made was under the direction of someone. Although Wanyan Xu rushed to and from Su Yi's residence every day, they found that they could not speak to each other congenially, and so did not say much to each other and therefore, Wanyan Xu failed to notice Su Yi's apathy.

Instead it was Zi Liu who grew steadily more worried, thinking to herself: *as the saying goes, when a cow refuses to drink, it must be compelled. But now that the Emperor has pushed Young Master to his limits, could it be that what he accomplished has been to force a healthy, vital man to become like a living corpse? It is too cruel that Young Master should suffer such a fate.*

Zi Liu did not dare to delay further and promptly set aside time to seek out Wanyan Xu in the administrative halls of the Outer Court. She then proceeded to relay to him how Su Yi now spent his days and his behaviour, not leaving out a single detail.

Wanyan Xu did not seem to be surprised at all, saying gravely: "He has been beset with many changes in a short amount of time, and he is now faced with an extremely unappealing prospect. It is inevitable that he will feel despondent for a while, but it will not become a serious problem." Although he said this, and instructed Zi Liu to leave, he was ultimately still perturbed over Su Yi's condition. Therefore, he put

aside the memorial he had been reading and after giving Zi Nan some instructions, he proceeded to make his way to Su Yi's residence. When he arrived, he saw that the Garden of Merriment situated opposite appeared to display even more enchantment under the sunlight. Its vibrant colours and elegant lines created a truly magnificent vision. Thinking of how, in a month's time, his beloved and he would be sharing a bed and pillows under the eaves of this gorgeous and graceful palace, Wanyan Xu was elated beyond measure and wished only for that day to arrive sooner. But it also brought to mind the destruction of the Great Qi, inwardly, he reminded himself that it was to build this very palace --- the epitome of extravagant luxury --- that the Qi Emperor had doomed his country. He must remind himself ten-thousand times of the mistake made by his predecessor; he must never allow himself to over-indulge in the pleasures offered in this beautiful place and lose his drive to forge ahead. Such folly would make a mockery of his motives for moving the capital; rendering it a flawed deed that had no merit, only detriment.

While pondering over these thoughts, he had come to Su Yi's bedchamber. Entering the room, he saw that the purposeful man he had come to know was lying on the bed, staring into thin air with total apathy. Although his body had been receiving much care and nourishment over the previous days, he did not seem to have put on any weight. With the knowledge that the day of the coronation ceremony was getting steadily closer with the passing of each day, his tormented heart had also been feeling increasingly heavy as the days passed.

Wanyan Xu stealthily observed him from behind a curtain, when Zi Nong noticed him and opened her mouth to pay her respects, she was prevented from making a sound by the waving of his hand. After watching with frustration for ages, he turned back, only to see that Zi Nan was standing in the courtyard with an unfamiliar man, they seemed to be waiting for something. He nodded his head, and then quietly retreated behind a screen. He saw Zi Nan lead the man into the room, although he could not clearly make out his features, he soon heard a trembling voice call out: "Ruo... Ruo Zhi, is that really you?"

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In an instant, Wanyan Xu's heart leapt to his throat; not even caring to blink, his eyes were fixed upon Su Yi, carefully taking note of his every movement. He saw that Su Yi had lifted his head in amazement; after looking carefully at his visitor, strong emotions, which had been wholly absent for the past few days, showed on his face. Almost as if he did not dare to believe that this was happening, his voice trembled as he said: "Jin... Jin Hua..." Leaving his speech unfinished, he struggled to climb out of the bed and Zi Nong rushed over to assist him.

Wanyan Xu could finally feel relieved and gave a soft sigh, having seen for himself that Su Yi had not become totally dispassionate to everyone and everything. A hint of a smile hung around the corners of his lips and he turned to leave. Zi Nan also made an inconspicuous retreat, following behind Wanyan Xu, she said: "Master, you're not going to stay and hear what they have to say?"

Wanyan Xu said cheerfully: "That won't be necessary; I just needed to know that his heart is still alive." Having said that, he smiled tenderly and speaking softly, as if talking to himself, he said: "Su Su, oh, Su Su, I should have known that a man such as you would not let yourself become a walking corpse just because you have suffered a reversal, but I could not help but to worry." Addressing Zi Nan again, he said: "Let that Xu Jinhua spend a night in the palace, as a pair of old friends that have just been reunited, they probably have a lot to talk about." After remaining silent for a good while, he said: "Aii, Su Su he... he should have someone he can speak his mind to."

Zi Nan could see that a glimmer of desolation had coloured his expression and rushed to change the subject, saying: "Master, your humble servant did not know before that Young Master's courtesy name [2] is Ruo Zhi, ha ha, your humble servant feels that this name is extremely pleasant to the ear, what does Your Majesty think?"

Wanyan Xu nodded his head in agreement and smilingly said: "But I still prefer to call him Su Su. Every time I call him that, I will feel as though he is something precious

that I have cradled right in the palm of my hand, I... like this type of feeling.”

The two of them continued chatting as they walked, when suddenly a delicate and pretty figure appeared in front. Zi Nan was the first to call out: “Zi Yan.” Having said that, she turned in surprise to Wanyan Xu and said: “Isn't she supposed to be at the Yu Residence helping General Yu Cang to take care of some matters that relate to the end of the war? What is she doing here?”

Wanyan Xu was equally surprised. They watched as Zi Yan approached, her exceptionally beautiful visage wore a disconsolate expression. Upon reaching them, she knelt down straightaway, not paying formal homage to Wanyan Xu, she only said: “Zi Yan earnestly requests that Master rescinds his order.” Wanyan Xu's surprise only increased, and he quickly said: “Rise, take your time and speak clearly. Upon arrival you immediately requested that I rescind my order, but it is not clear to me exactly which order has earned your strenuous objection?”

Zi Yan continued kneeling, after giving a kowtow, she raised her head to reveal her solemn mien and said: “It is the matter of raising Su Yi to Empress, Zi Yan beseeches Master to rescind this order.”

Wanyan Xu was shocked and made no immediate reply. He stared at Zi Yan for a long time before suddenly speaking in a grim tone: “That will not be possible, you need not speak further on the matter. My decision is final but on the day of the ceremony, you can come and assist with attending to the various guests and dignitaries if you please, but if you do not wish to attend, you are free to keep to your own residence for the day.” So saying, he turned and left.

Zi Yan did not pursue the matter further, the four women had served Wanyan Xu for many years and she understood his temperament well. Whenever he would say such things with finality and without asking further questions, she would understand that on that particular issue, there was no room for negotiation or change whatsoever. Even if the entire court of officials from both the civil and military branches were to object, it would be of no use, needless to say, a humble servant like herself had no chance of making any impression. She continued kneeling,

although Wanyan Xu had already walked past and thus her back was now to him. She muttered: "Ah, Your Majesty, you are already remiss for being willing to brave the criticism of the entire world and openly set up a male Empress, but in addition, this man you have chosen is an unyielding prisoner of war who is still steadfastly loyal to his destroyed country. Zi Yan never expected that you would become besotted with Su Yi to this extent. In the future when the both of you begin sharing a bed, wouldn't he gain even more influence on you? The lands that we have won through arduous fighting, I'm afraid that within a blink of an eye, Su Yi will be able to wrest them back without needing an army or even expending a single soldier."

Speaking of Su Yi, upon meeting his old friend, it was impossible for him not to feel a mixture of grief and delight. This Xu Jinhua and he were both appointed as court ministers at the same session of court, and the two of them had a congenial relationship. However, Xu Jinhua was a civil minister; therefore after Su Yi was assigned to defend the border, the two of them had no more opportunities to meet. Now that they have finally met up again, they were naturally excited and happy. However, to meet under these circumstances was also a cause for lament and they sighed with regret.

Su Yi dithered for a while, but he finally asked: "How have you been after the destruction of our country? Were you also held in prison? I have been worried about you, your natural disposition is honest and upstanding and you would refuse to submit. I was afraid that after Yu Cang captured Dou Yan, you would cause him embarrassment in public and bring upon yourself a fatal calamity. But I did not dare to make enquiries about your fate; that Wanyan Xu specialized in using the lives of my captured soldiers as a bargaining chip to make me comply with his wishes, if he knew of your existence, he would certainly use you as a pawn as well. Aii!" Having said that, he sighed long and loud.

Xu Jinhua smiled bitterly and said: "You really understand me well, but unfortunately, even before the destruction of our country, I had already been condemned to death and was languishing in prison. I did not have the opportunity to protest Yu Cang's actions."

Su Yi was stupefied and said: “Before the destruction of our country... that means it was the Emperor [3], why did he do that, and how did you offend him?”

Xu Jinhua sighed and said: “Can you really not guess the reason? His Majesty wantonly conscripted labourers and consumed many resources to construct the Garden of Merriment, things got so bad that the common people had no way to make a living. Aggravating the problem, he even diverted critical funds meant for the military with not even a single consideration for the consequences of this action. I could bear it no longer, and remonstrated with him. I only managed to say ‘*the lands of the border are bitterly cold, if the soldiers are not provided with rations and supplies, General Su cannot be expected to defend against the ferocious attacks of Jin Liao successfully. Your Majesty enjoys the immediate pleasures of the Garden of Merriment, but in building it, the seed of our country's destruction has been sown.*’ The sycophantic villains in court immediately seized upon this opportunity to denounce me, saying that I have slandered the Emperor and cursed the Great Qi to meet her doom. The Emperor also did not like what I have said, and so he charged me with those crimes and sentenced me to death. His original plan was to execute me on the day that construction would be complete on the Garden of Merriment but who could have guessed that that day coincided with Yu Cang's attack on Dou Yan. His Majesty had more important matters on his mind than my execution, and thus, I escaped with my life.” At the conclusion of his speech, Xu Jinhua could not help but to sigh incessantly. Su Yi kept on staring at him; he was so surprised by Xu Jinhua's narrative that he was totally stumped.

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Xu Jinhua took a look at Su Yi's expression, before continuing indignantly: “Aii, an incapable ruler is the doom of his country, this saying is absolutely true. I never thought I would live to see the day I would have to witness my own sovereign digging the grave of his country, but who can I blame for that? However what astonishes me even more than that is that after the country fell into the hands of a foreign tribe, the people are actually enjoying better lives than before. Even ministers like me who had served the old regime, were released by the new ruler, Wanyan Xu.”

Su Yi gave a bitter laugh and suddenly said: "Jinhua, since you have said that, does that mean you do not wish to restore the Great Qi?"

Xu Jinhua said loudly: "Of course I wish to restore our country. On the day I was released, all I could think of was that our country has been ruined and our home lost and my heart was full of worry and anger. As a scholar and intellectual [1], it is only right that I regard the recovery of the territories of the Great Qi as a sacred duty. But what use is that, could you or I really recover the territory? Once that Wanyan Xu conquered the Great Qi, he reduced taxation and ordered that grain and food should be released to the people affected by natural disasters. With his actions, a country that was seething with popular grievances was mobilized in a matter of days and a hundred things were done to recuperate and build up the strength of the people. Now, the common people have no worries when it comes to food or clothing, to them, they seem to have ascended to heaven from the eighteenth level of hell. What do they know, they have been living a hand-to-mouth existence for an extended period of time, and they cannot possibly have much moral integrity left. Instead, they feel grateful to the new ruler for his benevolence. I've passed through many places in past half a year, and have found that besides scholars such as myself, there is nobody else that cares at all for Great Qi albeit the regime had become decayed and corrupt." After this speech he gave a bitter laugh before continuing: "In these circumstances, scholars are utterly ineffectual. When we gather together, all we can do is whine and make a few harsh diatribes, how can that ever translate into useful action? Moreover, Jin Liao has a strong army, surplus grain and a surfeit of talented officials and commanders. With these advantages, we need more people like you to even have a possibility of overcoming them in battle, but where should we go to find such people?"

When Su Yi looked upon Xu Jinhua's inconsolable expression, he understood that although he had only spoken briefly of his own feelings, he must have endured much suffering at the time all these events were transpiring. Although Xu Jinhua had said that they required people of Su Yi's calibre to have a chance at success, but his current prospects were bleak and unbearably embarrassing. Thinking back, this situation was cause for his soul to break and be dejected. He could only grip his

friend's hand tightly but did not say a word. Two pairs of eyes looked at each other, in each other's gazes they could see inexpressible depths of woe and sorrow.

Zi Nong had been standing quietly to the side, after a protracted silence, she felt that the atmosphere had become much too depressing. Zi Nong was frank and outspoken by nature, and she could not help interjecting: "Young Master Xu, since you are a scholar, don't tell me that you don't know that the most important quality for a scholar is to be reasonable? You can see that the people are reluctant to go back to the old regime, to return to the days of having to sell their own sons and daughters so as to survive, why must you scholars oppose our Jin Liao just because of your so-called fealty? In my view, this cannot be counted as righteous loyalty, it is merely blind loyalty. Aii, even a unimportant servant like me knows of the saying '*the people are most important, the state is second, and the monarch is the least important*', so how could you not know of this principle? Besides, our Emperor values the common folk most highly, he has never forced the people of Qi to conform to the customs of Jin Liao, nor has he allowed us to scorn and oppress Qi people. When Young Master Su has become the Empress of Jin Liao, it would be just like being united through marriage, Jin Liao and Great Qi could then be considered one family. The relationship between our two peoples would be even more harmonious, what is bad about that scenario?"

The mood instantly became heavy and uncomfortable; Zi Nong's careless speech had finally brought up the sensitive issue of Su Yi's impending marriage and coronation. Su Yi's face immediately turned florid, and even his ears were reddened. Feeling deeply ashamed in front of his old friend, he couldn't help but to hang his head.

Xu Jinhua silently observed him for a long while but suddenly said: "Ruo Zhi, we entered government service at the same time, and have always enjoyed a friendly relationship. I have also always regarded you as a confidant. Now, I have something I would like to say, but I'm afraid that if I say it, you would accuse me of belittling you. If you won't take offense, do you mind if I voice my thoughts?"

Su Yi smiled bitterly and said: "As matter stand, there is no harm done in speaking a

sentence more or a sentence less. If you have something on your mind, please tell me, I won't blame you.”

The words had almost reached Xu Jinhua's lips but he swallowed them back before hesitating again and finally deciding to say them: “Ruo Zhi, I feel that if you and Wanyan Xu indeed have feelings for each other, does it really matter if you do become his Empress?”

Su Yi had never expected to hear such words from Xu Jinhua, his head jerked up in amazement and he stared at Xu Jinhua. Xu Jinhua hurried to elaborate: “Ruo Zhi, I have said before, I do not underestimate you, and I am not disrespecting your dignity as a man. I only meant to say if you also have any affection for Wanyan Xu, even if only a little, and you do not utterly detest him, there is nothing bad about becoming his Empress. As this young lady has said, the people are the most important, as long as the people are free from oppression and can live peaceful lives, it is not important exactly who are the Emperor and Empress. Aii, if it wasn't because I have come to understand this, I would not be willing to utter such words. The person occupying the throne previously was indeed a genuine Dragon [2] of Great Qi and the Son of Heaven, but what was the result? Even people who lived on fertile lands could not get by with farming and had to resort to selling their children, not to mention those people who lived in the barren regions or lands struck by natural disaster [3]. I've even heard that even cannibalism had become commonplace. Although the current Emperor is of Jin Liao origin, the phrase *'love the people like his own children'* can be applied to him. If I disregard my hatred towards him for destroying our country, I can honestly say that I admire him greatly. Ruo Zhi, I've always understood your character, since the situation is already like this, don't make life difficult for yourself, there is no need for it now. Strictly speaking, the person responsible for creating your present predicament, wasn't it none other than the Qi Emperor you vowed loyalty to and served with devotion?”

Before Su Yi could speak, Zi Nong had applauded with delight and said: “this Young Master's words are so intelligent, he fully deserves the title of scholar indeed. Even though I know of this principle, I am unable to articulate my thoughts so incisively.” So saying, she turned to address Su Yi: “Young Master, even your good friend has this opinion, your heart should be able to feel more at ease, don't keep torturing

yourself like this all day. Isn't it true that you have once said that if it wasn't for the fact that you are from enemy factions, you and our Emperor could really become life-long confidants?"

Su Yi was silent for a long time, finally, he gave a "humph" and said: "Even if I wish to refuse him, is the decision really mine to make? The fate of all my old friends and their relatives is in his hands, I have no room to oppose him." Having said that, he looked out the window and as if he were speaking to himself, he said: "Spring is coming to an end, the grand ceremony to crown an Empress... It will soon be the day, won't it?"

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Crimson garments, an extravagant crown heavily encrusted with luminous oriental pearls, a table piled high with a huge variety of ornaments and pendants crafted out of the finest jade with a pure, delicate white colour. Wanyan Xu looked at the dazzling array of wedding paraphernalia and felt truly jubilant. Su Su, the person he had yearned for day and night, would officially be his wife in both name and deed after tonight [1] in addition to becoming the first male Empress of Jin Liao in history.

"Have all the preparations been completed over at Su Su's residence?" He asked Zi Liu, only for a big smile to grace the face of his trusted and dear servant as she said: "Of course they are complete, and the table there is equally loaded with precious items, your Majesty need not be fret."

Wanyan Xu also gave a smile and said: "I [2] also know that that is a pointless question, but my heart feels too excited, so excited that I don't know what to do with myself. Zi Liu, in my whole life, this is the first time I have felt like this. How can I describe it, although I am nearly delirious with joy, I am also feeling helplessly nervous. Ever since I started to mature and understand my place in the world, I have experienced many momentous events. I have never experienced the crowning of an Empress but it probably cannot be considered as pivotal as my ascension to the throne or moving the capital, right? But I was able to handle those events with

meticulous care, and they passed without causing me much emotional turbulence. This... this night..."

Zi Liu watched as Wanyan Xu paced around the floor in circles. Clearly written on his face, which normally betrayed no hint of his emotions, was unequivocal joy and exuberance. Also uncharacteristic for him, he was rambling on and on. Zi Liu couldn't help but laughingly interrupt: "Your Majesty is right, you have been through so many important events, how is it that today you are unable to remain calm? Young Master will be your Empress by tomorrow..." Upon that mention, she saw that a wide smile had immediately blossomed on her Master's face, and she helplessly shook her head, thinking to herself: *he's happy to this extent, seems like nothing I say will have any effect.*

Wanyan Xu rubbed his hands together and suddenly said: "Zi Liu, what do you think Su Su is doing now?"

Zi Liu smiled but abstained from answering, thinking in her heart: *What's he doing? Does that really need to be asked? Of course he is resenting you, it is even possible that he hasn't given up and is trying to think of ways to escape this marriage.* But of course, she did not dare to say these words aloud, seeing that her Master was so excited, she could not say such things that would surely dampen his mood and hurt his feelings.

On the other hand, Wanyan Xu did not really need for her to reply, looking in the direction of Su Yi's residence, he saw that it was already blazing with light, and murmured, seemingly to himself: "Su Su must also have been unable to fall asleep last night." After staring for a long while, he suddenly turned to Zi Liu and said: "Let's go, accompany me to Su Su's place for a while, I wish to see him."

This gave Zi Liu an almighty fright, she thought: *Young Master is more than likely in a grand rage now, if the King goes there in his current state of excitement, it might aggravate Young Master further and he might take his anger out on His Majesty.* She hurried to advise Wanyan Xu: "There is no need for Your Majesty to be impatient, tomorrow night you will both retreat together into the bridal room filled with

ornamental candles. According to the customs of Great Qi, the bride and groom should not see each other the day before the wedding. You only have to bear with it a while longer, it should not be so difficult to do."

Wanyan Xu cheerfully replied: "I am not from Great Qi, this rule doesn't apply to me. I don't know why, but I wish to see him now, and I cannot wait any longer." So saying, he did not wait for Zi Liu to attend to him, but haphazardly draped a coat over himself and walked out. Zi Liu found the situation cause for both worry and mirth, but hurried to follow Wanyan Xu.

Unfortunately Zi Liu's guess turned out to be correct; Su Yi was indeed surveying the clothes and accessories that had filled his room with displeasure. Using a mixture of persuasion and coercion, Zi Nong had forced him to memorize all the rules and procedures of the ceremony that would be held on the morrow. The persuasion had taken the form of a thousand coaxes and ten-thousand pleas, while coercion consisted of attacking that one fatal weakness of Su Yi's. Therefore, although Su Yi was impatient, he also took it seriously; afraid that should he commit a gaffe tomorrow and cause Wanyan Xu to be embarrassed, the ones who would have to suffer for his crime would be his "jailed" friends and their relatives.

At the moment, the little Crown Prince Wanyan Shuo was also present as Su Yi had not been in the mood to force him to leave. But fortunately, this time the little boy had reigned in his normally caustic tongue, and did not say a word. Although it must be said that even if the boy had chosen to make his usual provocative remarks, Su Yi did not have the energy to argue with him.

When Zi Nong suddenly saw Wanyan Xu, accompanied by Zi Liu, approaching with casual steps, she hurried to greet and welcome him. Laughing, she said: "Your humble servant was just thinking that since it is the Great King, he will surely be able to contain his excitement, but Your Majesty has come anyway." The four personal attendants had served Wanyan Xu ever since their childhood, therefore the relationship between them and Wanyan Xu did not have the same degree of formality as that of other servants and their masters.

When Wanyan Xu saw that Wanyan Shuo was also present, he smiled and said: "Why have you come all the way here? And you are well-behaved today, when I was in the courtyard, I could not hear your voice. That is rare indeed."

Wanyan Shuo giggled and said: "Royal Father, I was just thinking, if I have half his dedication when it comes to learning rules, the person holding the position of Royal Tutor would not need to be changed so frequently. I heard that I made the previous tutor so angry that he vomited blood, and you had to bestow upon him a lot of valuable supplements and restoratives. What a waste!"

After giving a "humph!", Wanyan Xu said: "It's good that you know this. I really don't know about you. If you can change, it would be like the sun rising from the west." So saying he walked near to Su Yi and accompanying his words with a smile he said: "Su Su, you are preparing for the ceremony so carefully, I am really touched."

Su Yi turned away from him, seemingly intent on ignoring him. After giving a couple of "humph!"s, he said: "Don't mistake my intentions, I'm only doing this for the sake of the poor people in your dungeons."

Wanyan Xu had still not come out of his blissful haze, when he was just about to question Su Yi, Zi Liu hurried to interject: "Young Master is right, if Young Master becomes the Empress tomorrow without a hitch, the people being held in jail would naturally be released." Only then did Wanyan Xu recover his senses, with a start, he realized that he must have really hurt Su Yi's heart by employing such methods to compel his cooperation. He was momentarily lost for words, thus nobody spoke and the room fell silent.

Wanyan Shuo suddenly gave a big yawn and said: "It's already the fourth watch, I want to go back and sleep, tomorrow will be a busy day." He gave a wicked smile before addressing his father: "Royal Father, You should also go take a rest.

Tomorrow, during the daylight hours there would naturally be no idle time to rest. If you run out of energy, the wedding night will be frittered away, what a pity that would be!" After saying that, he giggled as he left for his own residence. Su Yi was both embarrassed and enraged, but he could do nothing about it. Conversely, Wanyan Xu

perked up. The two men spent the night like this, and before too long, the marble white colour of the dawn sky began to spread from the east, followed by the red sun slowly showing its face from between the peaks of the mountains.

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Su Yi would never be able to forget this day, nor will he ever be able to forget the exact moment when he was forced into becoming the Empress of Jin Liao.

Walking slowly along the path that had been covered with a layer of newly-woven red carpet, his heart gave a quiver in time with each step that he took. Perhaps in everyone's eyes, the road he was walking on was the despicable path towards surrender and repudiating his own roots; or perhaps they saw the road he was taking as the glorious path towards having to bow to only one but having supremacy over all others. But however others may view it, Su Yi knew that he could no longer turn back from the path he was set on.

After completing the long and tedious rituals, Wanyan Xu and he adjourned to a grand banquet hall, where a sumptuous feast had been laid out, to receive congratulations and well-wishes from the assembled crowd. From the dais, he looked with disinterest at the Jin Liao courtiers gathered below and felt contemptuous of them for duplicitously concealing their true feelings with smiling faces. He knew that he hated them; hated them because although they clearly disapproved of Su Yi becoming Empress, no one dared to stand up to Wanyan Xu, no one dared to voice their opposition. Maybe if they had, Wanyan Xu would have had to exercise more discretion and as for himself, he might have had at least a chance of escaping this fate.

Once the formal congratulations were completed and the courtiers had been seated, instead of an awkward silence descending upon the assembly as Su Yi had expected, there was a buzz of unprecedented excitement and liveliness in the air. Su Yi thought that these people from Jin Liao must really be good at acting because they obviously should want to leave as soon as possible and be done with this

fiasco. Once again, Su Yi internally mocked them for their cowardice, no matter what, he could not believe that they could really accept that their new Empress was none other than an enemy from a country they had defeated and that person would henceforth also be the closest person to their Emperor.

“Su Su, I [1] know that you are not used to making small talk with courtiers, you can stay here and enjoy some snacks while I go down to mingle with them. Ordinarily, I have to be aloof and remote with them; perhaps only at a moment like this, I can interact with them casually for a while.” So saying, Wanyan Xu dragged Su Yi over to a corner and had him sit down on a large seat. At the moment, Zi Nong and the other personal attendants were busy with helping out in the hall, so after Wanyan Xu gave Su Yi a few more words of instruction, Wanyan Xu called over a palace maid and bade her to attend to Su Yi carefully. Again addressing Su Yi, he said: “If there are any well-wishers who approach to toast the happy occasion, please give me some face [2], and cope with them as best you can.” After saying that, he left, wearing a smile that brightened his whole face.

Su Yi watched as Wanyan Xu's figure weaved among the various courtiers, and when he thought of Wanyan Xu's parting remarks, he couldn't help but to heave a sigh. If he were to be honest with himself, he had to admit that Wanyan Xu's behaviour towards Su Yi could be considered thoughtful and gentle. Besides the matter of crowning Su Yi as Empress, he had deferred to Su Yi's preferences on every other matter and instead of making demands, he had always used polite language and soft words. But whenever Su Yi recalled how he had viciously threatened Su Yi's loved ones, his heart would invariably feel a tremble of fear. From that moment on, he had felt that this person was capable of being fathomlessly vindictive and although he treated Su Yi well at the moment, in future he could turn around and employ even more merciless methods if Su Yi displeased him or to force Su Yi to cooperate on another matter. Every time he thought of this, the little good opinion that he had developed of Wanyan Xu in his heart would vanish like smoke in thin air and furthermore, his heart would feel as if it had become coated with a layer of solid ice.

He originally had no intention of eating, but on this day the fire in his heart would not

be extinguished, and he felt that his mouth was dry and his tongue had become hot. Unable to resist, he lifted up his teacup and took a long drink. Before he could set it down, he saw that a tall and physically imposing military commander with a formidable aura was approaching. His heart filled with apprehension because this man could not be mistaken for anybody else --- it was none other than Yu Cang.

Speaking of Yu Cang, Su Yi had long heard of his towering reputation as a capable military commander. Later on, Su Yi also heard that after his surrender to Jin Liao, he began to serve Wanyan Xu and had fought many successful military campaigns in his service. By the time of Su Yi's capture, Yu Cang had been dispatched to attack the Great Qi and even upon his return to court after his victory, the two had never had the occasion to meet as Su Yi had always been confined to the Inner Court. Only today, when all the civil and military court officials were gathered together to offer congratulations, did Su Yi finally have the chance to meet Yu Cang face-to-face.

Su Yi put down the teacup slowly; in his heart he understood that Yu Cang was definitely not coming simply to congratulate Su Yi. As he expected, under the gaiety projected by the smile he had forced onto his face, Su Yi could detect a faint hint of gloom. Carrying a cup in his hands, he came before Su Yi and making a toast, he said: "Your subject Yu Cang congratulates General Su. Previously I had thought that the General would not be able to adapt to the current circumstances and although I thought that it was not worth it to continue your resistance, I was full of admiration for you. Who would have thought that within a short time, General has understood that a good bird chooses the tree upon which to perch just as the talented subject chooses the lord that he shall serve. Exceeding all expectations, you have even flown to the top of the tree to become the Empress of Jin Liao; this is indeed worthy of celebration."

Su Yi's breath caught in his throat, he knew that although Yu Cang's words could be taken as praise, in reality, his words were loaded with sarcasm and were meant to provoke Su Yi. He had clenched his fists, only after a good long while was he able to relax them and he said in a low voice: "The General is too kind, as a prisoner of war Su Yi had no intention of surrendering. However, Wanyan Xu used various methods

to force me, and even held General Yu up as an example for me to follow. Under his multi-pronged attacks, Su Yi had to betray his conscience and promise to be his Empress. The General must find Su Yi worthy of ridicule.”

Yu Cang's expression changed and for a moment, it looked like he may choose to go on the offensive right then but with great effort he was able to contain himself. Forcing a laugh, he said: “It seems like your subject can only congratulate Empress Niang Niang [3], and pray that you would be able to stand on your high branch for a good long time, and perch there for your entire lifetime.” So saying, he turned and stalked off without giving salutations to Su Yi.

Su Yi exhaled in relief, however the last sentence uttered by Yu Cang seem to carry a hidden meaning. Actually Su Yi also understood full well that Wanyan Xu had only become infatuated with Su Yi because he had found Su Yi difficult to conquer and in future when he had become tired of Su Yi, there is no way to predict how Su Yi's circumstances would change. However, he did not feel even a little sad when he thought of that prospect.

Suddenly he heard the little Crown Prince Wanyan Shuo's voice, between laughter, he stammered out: “So you are really not someone who will turn the other cheek when provoked. At first I thought that you would not be able to handle him, but in the end, you lived up to my expectations.” So saying, he looked at Yu Cang's retreating back and said: “I don't know why, but I loathe this person very much. He's too proud and he doesn't allow people to criticize him even a little bit. The reason why he came to cause you trouble is because the only motive you had in agreeing to become the Empress of Jin Liao was to spare the common people of Great Qi any suffering whereas the reason he surrendered was because he was unable to withstand the torture and punishment inflicted upon him after his capture. Although he always claims that he switched sides only because he recognized that my Royal Father is an eminently wise ruler, but when the story got out his reputation was still damaged. When contrasted with your conduct, his reputation suffers even more for the comparison. For such an arrogant man, how could he not be furious and hold a grudge?”

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Su Yi said blandly: "Reputation? As a defeated general, why should one still care so much about reputation?" Although it might seem that he said these words to Wanyan Shuo, it also seemed as though he meant to direct those words at himself.

Wanyan Shuo gave a grunt and said: "Exactly so, the both of you are two pedantic, what is reputation after all? It is a matter to be judged posthumously by people that come after us. Since you have made sacrifices to ensure the welfare of the common people, even if you surrender, people would say that it is a case of a talented person choosing as a patron of integrity, and consider you a good person. If your actions damage the country and cause suffering to the people, even if you never submit to the enemy, people would still call you a bad egg. Humph, even though you are a grand General and have been praised as having exceptional ability in both martial arts and scholarly studies, you still fail to understand this truth that even I, a little child, can grasp." So saying, he turned to leave, but suddenly turned back to say: "But that's alright, I will teach you well in future, my Mother Empress." Only then did he leave, giggling all the while.

At this moment, Su Yi was feeling unsurpassed grief, but he sorely wished that he could smash his teacup on the body of this devious little imp of a child. Though the exchange had rankled Su Yi, it must be said that the feelings he had been experiencing of remorse and self-censure were greatly diluted. He suddenly sensed that another person had come to stand in front of him, lifting his head to take a look, he saw that it was none other than Xu Jinhua, whom he had no news of after their meeting on that day.

In his excitement, he unconsciously started to get on his feet, only for this long-time close friend to press him down into his seat with a smile before saying: "There are many pairs of eyes fixed on you now. Since you have now occupied this seat, you must not neglect to conduct yourself in the manner befitting your current position in case people say that us Qi folk do not even understand these simple rules of

etiquette.”

Su Yi slowly re-seated himself, from the look in his eyes, it was clear that he almost did not dare to believe what he was seeing. He said: “You... How have you managed to come here?”

Xu Jinhua replied: “It is your wedding after all, how could I not come? Whether you entered into this marriage willingly or unwillingly is another matter, but it is still something that will affect your whole life. Besides, I knew that at this moment you would definitely be inundated with feelings of hate and anger, if I didn't come to advise you, you might take things too hard. How could I live with myself in future?”

Su Yi laughed bitterly and said: “Matters have already come to this, what is there to advise me about? You do not need to console me, a defeated general who betrayed his country, that is the name I have secured for myself.”

Xu Jinhua said: “You still care about that? If you really do care, I can tell you that I left my home early this morning and wandered around the streets until the auspicious time had come and the palace gates opened to admit guests. From what I could see, the people were very happy and were saying that although the Emperor is of Jin Liao origin, the Empress is one of their own. As someone born in the Great Qi, how could the Empress not speak up to protect the interest of the common people of Qi in future? Also the spoke of how this new monarch exercises great tolerance, and does not discriminate between the difference races and ethnic origins. Etcetera etcetera, most of the comments I heard were in this vein. You see, even though Wanyan Xu has failed to win your heart, he has won over the large majority of the Great Qi populace.”

Su Yi's eyes were wide and he was dumbstruck. He muttered: “How could this be? How could this be? Could it be that the people... could it be that they do not ‘*attach the most importance to the country*’ [1], not even a little bit? Why do they praise him?”

Xu Jinhua sighed and said: “Well, that is because the life of a dog living in peace and

security is better than the life of a man living in a world of chaos and ruin. The saying goes that only after one has a country can one have a home, but our Great Qi has proved this saying wrong. Rather it was the opposite, only after losing their country, could the people build a home. Aii... that's why I said that you need not carry so much anxiety anymore, it has already... already come to this point... whether you love it or whether you hate it, the situation is set. Why not relax the standards you have set in your mind, and let yourself be happier? Ruo... Ruo Zhi, I have to beg something of you. Since you are occupying this position, you will naturally be considered as this country's... this country's Mother of the Nation. As such, you have to assist Wanyan Xu in governing our homeland well, and help him bring about a golden age of peace and prosperity across all the lands of this country."

Su Yi hung his head and remained silent, thus he did not notice when Wanyan Xu returned to his side. Xu Jinhua hurriedly stood up and was about to take his leave when the new monarch, who was as pleased as punch, said: "Young Master Xu is upright and plainspoken, a man of outstanding ability, I [2] have long heard of your many accomplishments. Although I have been wishing to recruit you as a minister for my court, I was afraid that you would think that I was trying to compel you with my imperial authority. Upon this serendipitous meeting today, Wanyan Xu wishes to state this plainly; if Young Master wishes to assist in creating a life of prosperity for the people, you can become a minister in the court at any time. I [3] shall never waste Young Master's talents."

Xu Jinhua gave a smile and said: "Jinhua will remember the Great King's words." After saying that, he finally left. Su Yi lifted his head to stare into Wanyan Xu's eyes and said blandly: "You said that you were afraid that he would think you were trying to compel him through exercising your power, but why are you afraid of that? It can't be because you lack experience with those methods?"

Wanyan Xu gave a few "he he" laughs, at the point he had finally gotten his heart's desire and was beaming with happiness, and Su Yi's heavy irony made no impression whatsoever on him. He didn't care at all for the fact that they were in front of an audience either, wrapping his arms around Si Yi's trim waist, he said: "Su Su, you need not hide behind brave words, it is almost time for us to retire to the bridal

chamber, if you can still maintain such an attitude there, you would have my full admiration.”

Su Yi was tremendously horrified, indeed, all his fears were being realised one after another. Taking a peek out the window, he said: “The sun has not set, it is still much too early to retire... you’re bluffing, although I have not... not been through a wedding ceremony before, I know this much at least. As a monarch of a country, how could you be so impatient.”

Wanyan Xu said: “How could I not be impatient, I have waited so many months. But the customs of Jin Liao differ from Great Qi, we don't necessarily have to wait until night falls to retire to the bridal chamber.” So saying, his lips hovered by Su Yi's ears and whispered: “The men of Jin Liao extol the practice of martial arts, therefore from an early age we have more energy than most people. Just one night is really as the poem laments *'the spring night is too bitterly short, before long the sun is rising in the sky'*; there is not enough time, so our custom is to retire to the bridal chambers after lunch. After offering another round of toasts, it will be time to go. This is already considered fairly late, Su Su, have you prepared yourself?

Su Yi's face glowed red, both panicked and angered, he couldn't find any words to delay further. In any case, Wanyan Xu was not going to tolerate any more dawdling, he had a hunger in his heart that he couldn't sate. Not saying anything further, he half-dragged and half-carried Su Yi to the Inner Court and taking advantage of a moment when Su Yi was distracted, he lifted him up in a bridal carry. With the speed of wind, he brought them to the residence that had been designated for the Empress --- the splendid and majestic Garden of Merriment.

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Numerous palace maidens and eunuchs were already kneeling to the side of the entrance, ready to greet and welcome the newly-wed couple. When Wanyan Xu came to the bedroom, the delicate and warm fragrance of sandalwood was the first thing that greeted them, followed by two palace maids who then drew up the drapes.

After entering the room, Wanyan Xu smilingly said to the attendants: "You can withdraw, just leave two behind in the outer room to serve tea and attend to our needs." So saying, he walked to the large bed and gently placed the person he had clasped in his embrace, who was trembling incessantly, onto the soft brocade bedding.

Su Yi squeezed his eyes shut, silently berating himself harshly for so easily showing weakness but in truth, his heart had already become timid with apprehension. Balling his fists up tightly, he made a valiant effort to present a resolute and obstinate exterior to Wanyan Xu. The burst of damp heat on his eyelids took him completely by surprise, he opened his eyes in shock and realised that the cause of that sensation was Wanyan Xu had licked him there. Wanyan Xu laughed and said: "I [1] knew that you would have to open them." Having said that, he clasped Su Yi's hands and one by one, he coaxed each finger to relax. In a soothing voice, he said: "Su Su don't be afraid, although there will be some pain the first time, I will be as gentle as possible."

Su Yi gave a "humph". Out of spite, he rashly blurted out: "What do I have to be afraid of? I will just treat it as being bitten by a dog, the only thing I can't say for sure is that whether a dog like you is more like a wolf dog or a mad dog." His words were intended to impugn Wanyan Xu, but to his disappointment, Wanyan Xu did not appear to be in the least bit peeved, instead he was chuckling happily as he unfastened Su Yi's belt. While his hands were busy, he said: "As for that, wouldn't you find out for yourself in a while?" As the belt was removed with a whoosh, the crimson robes Su Yi was wearing immediately parted and fell to his sides, revealing his under-clothes which had been fashioned from the finest snowy white silk. Alarmed and terrified, Su Yi grabbed and held on to his hands, preventing him from making any further moves.

Wanyan Xu smiled as he looked at Su Yi and said: "Su Su, tonight is the night of our wedding, ideally you would be willing, but if you are unwilling it doesn't matter. In either case, the night should not be wasted. If you are really afraid, I could stand to endure it for tonight, but what will the limits of my endurance be? This event will have to come one day." As he was speaking, his hands were moving non-stop. Because Su Yi was still trying to prevent him from proceeding further, in their battle, the snowy

under-robe was ripped and fell off Su Yi in tatters, exposing his chest which was covered with fine skin the colour of pale wheat, so light that it could almost be described as white.

Su Yi bit down on his lips hard as powerful feelings of shame flooded through his entire body. Unfortunately, Wanyan Xu seemed intent on increasing Su Yi's self-consciousness. As his hands wandered down to slip the crimson pants and underpants from Su Yi's hips, he said with a tender tone to his voice: "Su Su, from this moment on, you belong to me, just as I belong to you. The two of us shall live together in harmony, forever and ever, in this life and the next, we shall never be separated. Wouldn't that be good?"

"Not good." With difficulty, Su Yi managed to force out these two words, having his body bare and exposed to the air was causing him tremendous embarrassment, to the extent that his very breathing was becoming slightly disordered. His upper body belonged to the intense gaze of the man with eyes as hungry as those of a ravenous wolf, even though he had shut his eyes tightly, he could clearly feel those blazing eyes roaming around his body without restraint. Soon after, he could feel that a solid body was slowly pressing up against his own, it felt muscular without being coarse, and also, a pair of powerful arms was wrapping his entire body in an embrace.

Su Yi made a supreme effort to put up with Wanyan Xu's ministrations, refusing to give in to the impulse he had of shoving Wanyan Xu away. In his mind's eye, the indelible images of what had happened that day in the square flickered by in a loop and in his heart he desperately repeated this mantra: *endure this, you have to endure this*. Aloud, he said: "Wanyan Xu, if... if I let you have your way tonight, you... could you release those prisoners?"

Wanyan Xu peered down at Su Yi's face, which had become slightly twisted in his anxiety. While nodding he said: "Of course, although this question of yours brings to my mind very unpleasant memories of what had happened in the past. Su Su, I also have a wish, I wish that you will honour your promise to be by my side for as long as we both live, don't force me to transform into a beast again."

"You are a beast right now." Su Yi did not let himself get carried away and just grumbled softly but this gave Wanyan Xu a good opportunity to nibble delicately at Su Yi's earlobe and pull at it gently with his teeth, causing Su Yi's sensitive body to be immediately rocked by a wave of heat.

"Open your legs." Wanyan Xu patiently instructed the adored person that was lying under him, who was making a supreme effort to endure his attentions. But when the only result was that Su Yi clamped his legs even more tightly together, Wanyan Xu could only smile helplessly and press their chests closer together, until not even a sliver of a gap could be seen.

Su Yi could distinctly feel the thrum of Wanyan Xu's heartbeats, thump thump thump they went, robust and forceful. His own heartbeat also grew ever more frenetic and he simply did not know where he could hide his eyes or what to do with his hands. With his thoughts in disarray, a sudden coolness between his thighs took him by surprise. Taking advantage of his distracted state, a long, slender but muscular leg that did not belong to him had managed to wedge itself into the crevice between his own legs and furthermore, was rubbing against his groin with great skill, alternating heavy strokes with light brushes.

"Ah...", Su Yi gave a shriek. He tried to close his legs, but that was no longer possible, so he desperately thrashed around, trying to push aside this uninvited guest but he accidentally bumped into a large, distended object instead. Instantly his face was coloured with a blush as red as cinnabar, he knew all too clearly what that thing was, his mouth was especially familiar with it, having once intimately taken the measure of this fellow and knew exactly what its size was. Lascivious scenes from the incident in the bathroom flooded his mind, besides making Su Yi even more nervous, they also brought forth pangs of agony that bored into Su Yi's heart.

Wanyan Xu looked upon his blushing face, and said smilingly: "Su Su, what have you thought of? Why don't we go to the bathing pool located at the back and revisit the good times we had previously enjoyed?"

Finally, Su Yi could endure no further, the heartache and bitterness mingling

together in his heart were welling up irrepressibly. Fighting back his tears with sheer stubbornness, he managed to choke out: "You... how long do you intend to keep bullying me? If you really want it, then be more direct and get on with it, I'll just pretend... pretend to have died." So saying, he indeed forcibly stilled his body and refused to make the slightest movement.

Having been thus rebuked, Wanyan Xu felt some contrition in his heart and hurried to pacify Su Yi with coaxing words: "Alright, alright, alright, I won't say anymore. You should try to relax a more too, you are holding your body too rigidly, you will definitely get hurt like this." Come, let me help you." So saying, he stretched out a hand to Su Yi's back entrance. After circling the dense folds for a while, he took aim at the tight, small hole with a single finger and slowly began to press and knead the narrow opening.

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Wave after wave of peculiar feelings washed over him, emanating from his sensitive back entrance to sweep through his entire body. Su Yi clutched at the brocade mattress with a death grip and the knuckles of his fist turned white. How could this be? How was it possible that just because that body part was being teased and rubbed, his entire body was beginning to heat up uncontrollably, even his heart seemed to be giving a tremor in response to each and every movement of that finger. *Don't tell me... Don't tell me that I was born with an inherently licentious body? Even when another man is... it will also... it will also respond with such a lack of self-control.*

Su Yi was scared silly by these thoughts that were running through his mind, and then he proceeded to feel even more aggrieved and came to despise and repudiate his own body as well as himself. He berated himself for wasting that one chance he had to end his suffering; if he had acted faster, just a little bit faster, or maybe just a few seconds faster, he would have been able to join his country in death with an unblemished reputation and would never have had to experience the humiliation of his current situation.

When Su Yi thought about it, it occurred to him that Wanyan Xu is youthful and robust, and as an Emperor he was naturally the master of many palaces and gardens filled with numerous concubines, thus the matters of sex and love should have long become familiar and easy to him which accounted for the superlative level of skill he was currently displaying. Comparing Su Yi to him in this aspect was just like a martial arts contest between a tiny little infant and an eminent practitioner of that art; he was helpless and completely at the mercy of Wanyan Xu. He could only try to bunch his muscles up more tightly and the skin of his lips had been broken by being repeatedly bitten by both rows of his pearly teeth.

Bemused, Wanyan Xu lifted his head and said: "I'm trying to help you relax, but you have become even more tense, how can this be? Seems like I have no choice but to use this thing." So saying, he got up and walked over to a cabinet by the side of the headboard. Opening a drawer, he fished out a small box carved out of translucent emerald-green jadeite [2]. Upon further inspection, the box was divided into two layers when opened. Wanyan Xu scooped out a small amount --- about the size of his fingertip --- of an ointment that was the colour of snow. Going back to Su Yi, he again turned his attentions to Su Yi's back entrance.

Su Yi kept telling himself not to care, after all, this was a matter that only concerned flesh and blood, just another physical torment he must endure. But when Wanyan Xu started to explore that shameful area with his ointment-coated finger, Su Yi could not stop himself from instinctively trying to close that chrysanthemum [3]. Gently, Wanyan Xu slowly inserted his little finger into that cavity and rotated it a few times. With great difficulty, he managed to coax that narrow channel to expand a bit and then worked in his middle finger to probe deeply inside, coating Su Yi's intestinal walls with ointment at the same time. When he raised his head to look at Su Yi, he saw that his forehead was covered by a thin film of sweat, his face had turned purple from a combination of shame and pain, and his lips were stained with blood from having been bitten. But even so, he had not made even the slightest hum of noise.

Wanyan Xu lovingly stroked Su Yi's lips, and said softly: "Su Su, don't be like this, matters of love are as natural as Heaven's Law and Earth's Truths, and there is

nothing shameful about them. If your heart is uneasy, then just lay all the blame on me, it was I who forced you into this after all. The ointment I applied has two purposes, it moistens the insides to prepare it and it is also a moderately strong aphrodisiac. Otherwise you will keep forcing yourself to maintain control, and not only will your body be harmed, but it will also damage your mind." Even as Wanyan Xu was speaking, Su Yi had already felt a peculiar scorching itch beginning to flare up in his intestines, and soon his entire backside began to feel as though it had caught fire.

Wanyan Xu watched as the colour of his face gradually changed to become a brilliant scarlet, the jade stem [4] on his lower body had also slowly began to stand up in excitement. Swiftly, Wanyan Xu moved to take advantage of the situation. When he took that little thing in his hand, Su Yi was unable to restrain himself further, and Wanyan Xu had the pleasure of hearing his sweet moan. With exultation in his heart, and began to knead that jade stalk in his palm with even more devotion but his efforts were in vain --- Su Yi stubbornly refused to let another sound escape his lips. His eyes were squeezed shut, his whole body looked as it had been dusted with a thin layer of pink rouge and although he had become so aroused that tears were streaming down his face, he still refused to relax.

Wanyan Xu covered Su Yi's lips with his own, the two rows of white teeth parted easily and his tongue was able to slip inside. After lingering there for a long while in pleasurable exploration, he withdrew his lips and they began making their way to Su Yi's elegant clavicle and then down to the two red cherries that were standing erect on his chest before pausing to leave faint teeth marks on his sensitive navel.

"Ah ah... ah... ah..." He suddenly heard Su Yi give a few urgent but brief moans, and felt his whole body begin to convulse, his male root twitching especially vigorously. Following that, he felt a sheet of viscous liquid coat his own hands, and without having to look, he immediately understood what had happened. Removing his hand from Su Yi's lower body, he waved it directly in Su Yi's line of sight, smiled, and said: "Su Su, have you ever seen your own thing? I can see that you are really inexperienced, just a few strokes took you over the edge. I think you don't even know how to use your hand for release."

Su Yi had already been wishing that he could bang his head on the wall to commit suicide, upon hearing these words, he felt the shame and resentment mixed in his heart almost bubble over and could only shut his eyes tightly. Trying to avoid the problem like an ostrich burying its head in the sand, this action only made Su Yi appear even more adorable in Wanyan Xu's eyes. Actually, Wanyan Xu himself, having had the opportunity to luxuriate in that smooth body, was also feeling the urgency of his own desire. If he didn't consider the fact that this was the first time for the man he loved, that giant object would have already rushed inside without restraint or hesitation. He had been alive for nearly three decades, but he had never been so solicitous towards anybody before. At the moment, he was wholeheartedly concerned about Su Yi, not only did he not feel hard done by for having to put up with his pent-up passion, but he actually felt completely blessed and happy. Although love was merely a word, it had the power to cause men to become drunk and mesmerised.

He quickly lifted Su Yi's legs, but soon saw that although that beautiful chrysanthemum was budding, it was not yet in full bloom and was only half-opened. Under the stimulation of the aphrodisiac, it was pulsing in a most fascinating manner, loosening up one moment and tightening up the next.

The ointment that Wanyan Xu had applied to Su Yi really couldn't be considered one of the really strong love potions; it only had moderate aphrodisiac effects. He had known that this would be the first time for Su Yi and he would probably suffer excruciating pain, by using the medicine, Wanyan Xu hoped to alleviate Su Yi's suffering. The drug was very mild in nature, it was not detrimental at all to the body, nor will it cause Su Yi to become crazed with desire and lose his sense of self.

Although the characteristics of the drug was thus, Su Yi still felt that his back passage, nay, his whole body, was afflicted with an itch as hot as fire although the feeling was most intense in that tight and narrow chute. It felt just like a few ants were incessantly crawling around in circles, at times the sensation was pleasurable and relaxing, at times it became an itch that he couldn't scratch, that juxtaposition

made it intolerable. Just when he was at his limits, he suddenly felt a rounded object squeeze into him tentatively and that tingling itch immediately began to ease.

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Wanyan Xu was extremely nervous, worried that he would inflict pain on the man lying under him. He gently kissed his forehead, nose and red lips, followed by his smooth neck, rounded shoulders, beautifully shaped collarbone, and a puckered red cherry. His unwavering affection permeated each move, these meaningful caresses and kisses truly caused Su Yi to feel incomparably comfortable and snug. But a rather awkward scene was beginning to take place at Su Yi back entrance, although discomfort at the opening had been eased, the passage needed relief even more urgently than before. It was clamouring to be filled, for the itch to be absolved through the application of friction, but how could he ever say these words aloud?

In his mind, Su Yi still persisted in resisting, but his body was no longer taking into consideration its owner's intentions and honour. When Su Yi next regained his senses, that powerful waist had already made a thrust forward and a little bit more of Wanyan Xu's enormous desire was now lodged inside. He dearly wished to strangle himself, and he hastily tried to scoot back but this only had the effect of repeatedly creating more friction. Wanyan Xu was already doing his best to temper his impatience, so how could he withstand the added stimulation? In a deep groan, he said: "Su Su, don't move." After, he could no longer give a care to anything else, lifting Su Yi's legs up high, he placed one on each of his own shoulders. Free of any further hindrance, with a "hu" sound, his erection steadily advanced; aided by the ointment's lubrication, half of it had managed to slide in.

"Ah!" Pained, Su Yi let out a yowl. But the biting itch he had been suffering vanished due to the thrusting; therefore even in the throes of pain, there was a hint of sweet relief and his body twitched a few times involuntarily. Wildly kicking out with his legs, he said in alarm: "Wanyan Xu, put them down, you put the legs down now."

Wanyan Xu lowered his body, and his male root slid a few more inches inside Su Yi.

He put on an innocent smile and said: "Su Su, my legs are already on the bed, how can I put them down further? Don't tell me you want me to punch a hole in the bed so that I can stand on the floor? But if I use a standing position, it will be more vigorous when we do it. Because this is your first time, I am reluctant to use that position; later on when we have done this to familiarity, we can try that position for a change. Not only standing, we can try doing it from the back, or having you on top, or seated, etcetera, etcetera. There are still many more tricks, do you wish to have a taste of each and every one?"

Su Yi was angry enough to vomit blood; Wanyan Xu had obviously exploited his own faulty wording to tease him with innuendo again. Just as he decided to turn the other cheek and ignore Wanyan Xu, suddenly, he felt that huge object brush up against a sensitive spot on his body that he didn't know even existed and a tidal wave of pleasure rocked through his body at lightning speed, making it quake all over. His jade stem had already been standing up straight for some time, after his body gave a few more shudders, a stream of white fluid spurted out of it forcefully.

Su Yi stared at that thing in utter disbelief, not wanting, or daring to accept what had happened. He, he had actually shot another load and this time, this time, it was even without the assistance of Wanyan Xu's hand stimulating it... Heavens, could it be... could it be... "Wanyan Xu... I... am I really... really born... born as a debauched deviant." Su Yi looked at the other man as though he was begging for salvation, his trembling voice giving evidence to the panic and horror he felt in his heart.

Wanyan Xu saw that his eyes had become dull and lifeless, and big drops of tears were leaking from the corner of his eyes. Wanyan Xu knew full well that Su Yi prided himself on his strict self-discipline, but he also knew that Su Yi still didn't understand that when doing joyous things in bed, the body would react involuntarily, and was blaming himself for lacking willpower. He hurriedly bent down to comfort Su Yi: "No, no, of course not. Su Su, You don't know, but there is a spot inside the back passage that is linked to the jade stem, if it is touched, you will feel boundless pleasure. Even a monk would not be able to withstand that kind of stimulation, let alone you. Don't think too much about it, I swear that if I lied about this, I shall be punished by heaven and struck by lightning, you can ask someone else about it too if you still doubt me.

Aii, Su Su ah, even the sage Mencius [2] has said that appetite and lust are only natural, why do you think of sexual intercourse as something dirty and shameful?"

Su Yi looked at Wanyan Xu, the man who would be his own husband from this night on, hesitantly. He didn't understand why, but at this very moment when he was feeling intense shame, he suddenly recalled the words of his good friend Xu Jinhua. "Whether you love it or whether you hate it, the situation is set. Why not relax the standards you have set in your mind, and let yourself be happier?" Was that the way? To follow his own desires, sinking or floating in their wake, and not think about other things. What is the shame of capture, what is hatred for destroying one's country; were these principles to be pushed aside? How could he possibly do that? How could he ever let go of these feelings? But... but why... it seems like he is finding it increasingly difficult to control his body, the very body that was still connected to Wanyan Xu.

Wanyan Xu delicately kissed and licked away the tears gathered at the corner of his eyes, and said gently by his ear: "Su Su, you little fretful thing, I truly can endure it no longer." So saying, he drove his waist forward, burying the whole of his gigantic male root inside of Su Yi, before beginning to slowly thrust in and out. When he felt that the tight channel had become slightly wider, he increased the pace of his thrusts, they became rougher and rougher, in the end the whole room was filled with the "pa pa" sound of flesh slapping against flesh as well as Su Yi's moans and the suppressed sound of his sobs.

His whole body felt like it was being consumed by fire. Under the merciless penetration, even his butt cheeks could not escape the onslaught, two heavy and full sacs were knocking against them forcefully. A trickle of fresh blood wound down his thighs, so fine that it resembled a red silk thread, leaving his sensitive thighs to quiver in its wake. To his despair, Su Yi found that even though the pain was acute, the waves of pleasure did not abate and he was still unable to control himself. Also... it seems that he had become immersed in this ugly craving and could not disentangle himself.

His entire body was being controlled by Wanyan Xu, just like a helpless leaf caught

in the winds of autumn that could only drift along to where the wind chooses to go. Each and every powerful stroke caused his body to arch up and sink down each and every time. Like a small fishing boat caught in a turbulent ocean that could only ride the big waves, one moment he was perched at the crest only to be plunged to the trough at the next moment.

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Su Yi could not tell how much time had passed, he only felt that he was about to die from having to forcibly restrain himself from giving in to the powerful waves of pleasure. Caught in the implacable gulf between morality and sexual desire, he could only gasp for breath, and his body felt weak and unsteady. Sapped of even the ability to control his own vocalisations, the sound of his own moans rang in his ears. “Ah ah ah... en... wu wu...” Lewd sounds like these were emerging from his mouth, almost like he was speaking an obscene language, and then there was the charming cry that signalled the approaching peak of pleasure. He simply could not stand to believe it, but the one who had made that sound was none other than himself.

His trembling legs were still propped up on Wanyan Xu's shoulders, but only because Wanyan Xu was still holding up his thighs, if he hadn't done so, those wobbly legs would have slipped off long ago. For the first time, Su Yi found that he was not as strong as he had previously imagined, he was unable to maintain control over all the four emotions [1] life had to offer. He had violated the resolution he had set, not only could he maintain indifferent to the demands Wanyan Xu made on his body, but the intense pain his violation had caused had also been accompanied by undeniable pleasure. Tormented by his conscience, he felt like he was about to go mad, but suddenly, he felt a burst of scalding heat flood his back passage. Of course, the cause of this heat was that Wanyan Xu had finally and exhaustively released his love fluids into that passage, which was still very flexible in spite of having become relaxed.

The bedroom became quiet for a moment, the rays of the setting sun crept in through the windows, under this illumination, the room appeared to be as

breathtakingly lovely as a scene in a fantasy. After such vigorous exercise, the two people on the bed were panting and struggling to catch their breath. Wanyan Xu lay down, lovingly took Su Yi into his embrace and said apologetically: "Su Su, I [2] have hurt you, right? Aii, I had intended to bear with it a while long, but in the end I could tolerate it anymore. I wasn't even aware of what I was doing, I only knew I couldn't stop myself from racing ahead..." Before he could finish, Su Yi's face had turned pale, in a shaky voice, he said: "Don't... Don't say anymore, I beg of you, please don't say any more."

Wanyan Xu stopped speaking as he immediately understood that Su Yi was ultimately unable to undo the knot in his heart [3] and was still tormented by guilt. Looking down, he saw that there were traces of blood staining Su Yi's snowy-white thighs, and could not help but be distressed. Likewise, when he suddenly saw a trail of ropery liquid --- coloured white, but mingled with some red --- flowing down slowly, he was also unable to keep himself from feeling a bit of delight. That was his own seed, his seed was inside Su Su's body, this knowledge made him incomparably gratified. His Su Su belonged to him finally.

When this thought crossed his mind, that enormous object between his legs seemed to react by growing a consciousness of its own and was soon standing up proudly again. The two of them were still pressed up against each other, bare skin against bare skin, so Su Yi could immediately feel the change, and his body began to shrink backwards involuntarily. In his fright, he resembled a little rabbit that had been cornered by a fierce hound; in Wanyan Xu's eyes this adorable behaviour caused him to feel even more love and pity. Forcefully suppressing the flaming lust still burning in his lower abdomen, he quickly grabbed hold of Su Yi again and enveloped him in a tight hug. In a soothing voice he said: "Su Su don't be afraid, this is your first time, I will not make another demand so soon." So saying he lifted Su Yi and said: "You must be exhausted, besides your body is not only sweaty, it also... oh, also... that thing... and blood... Let me carry you to the bathroom to wash up."

Su Yi couldn't speak, only after a while was he able to say: "I'll... I'll go wash up by myself." Unexpectedly, Wanyan Xu picked him up into a bridal carry and said laughingly: "How could you wash up by yourself, I'm afraid that you don't even have

the strength to walk to the bathing pool now. Be obedient, it's better than I go with you. I can check if there are any injuries to that area at the same time, the two of us are now considered husband and wife, what's there for you to be shy about? No matter how shy you are, you will have to become accustomed to this in future."

So saying, without waiting for any further protests, he carried Su Yi to the large bath in the Garden of Merriment. The room was lavishly decorated with glistening jade everywhere, the light reflected off of them filled the room with a delicate green glow. Countless pearls of legendary beauty and size --- as large as pigeons' eggs --- studded the tall white marble pillars holding up the roof, and exquisite brocades and embroidered fabrics were draped in profusion throughout the room. These opulent decorations set off the simple beauty of the large and magnificent pool perfectly, the contrast creating an extraordinarily elegant and luxurious effect. Wanyan Xu unconsciously smiled and said: "That Qi Emperor really knew how to enjoy life; he could even create a bathroom that resembles a fairyland." After the words had slipped out, he suddenly realised that the mention of this would likely cause Su Yi heartbreak, and hurriedly shut his mouth.

Numerous petals had been scattered in the water by palace maids who had formerly served in the Qi palace, when the two of them were in the pool, Wanyan Xu's olfactory senses were assailed by the distinctive fragrance. Frowning, Wanyan Xu said: "Where did these petals come from?" The maids respectfully answered: "They were picked from flowers grown in the royal gardens." Wanyan Xu gave a grunt, nodding, he said: "This is alright for now, but in future there is no need to place petals here, neither Su Su nor I like them. Besides, to pamper oneself so much even when taking a bath, as time goes on, how can one refrain from overindulging in a life of luxury? It can't be helped that this bathroom has already been so extravagantly decorated by its former master, but in future do remember that we must be more prudent and cut out the unnecessary things. All we need is a pool of clear water that is of appropriate temperature."

When the palace maids heard this, they hurried to sound their obedience and promptly put away all the various precious oils and creams that had been collected in the room, leaving only mirrors, combs, towels and other essential supplies on the

shelves beside the pool, ready for use.

Wanyan Xu turn his head back, gathering Su Yi in his arms, he said softly by the side of his ear: "Su Su, thinking back on that episode we had in the baths of Jin Liao Palace, it's hard to believe that we would ever share a moment of tenderness like we are doing now. Aii, I... I was too cruel to you that day."

So saying he cupped his hands to scoop out water and poured it on Su Yi's body, wiping the impure fluids from his thigh. Looking at the reflection of that well-proportioned body with fine translucent skin on the pool's surface, he found it increasingly tantalising. He couldn't resist the temptation, since Su Yi was leaning against his chest because he couldn't hold himself upright, Wanyan Xu took full advantage of the opportunity to steal a few kisses. After that, he turned Su Yi's body over and said gently: "Su Su, bear with this for a while, let me see if there is any injury to that place, and I will clean out those things I left in you at the same time. If I don't, your stomach will become uncomfortable."

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Su Yi raised his head and looked at him blankly, but when he finally managed to decipher the meaning of Wanyan Xu's words, his face became the colour of a cooked prawn and his refined brows shot up in an expression of indignation. He didn't know where he managed to find the strength, but he managed to shove Wanyan Xu away with an arm and said: "Don't you dare."

As a result of being shoved, Wanyan Xu staggered a little and helplessly spread his hands to indicate surrender. Forcing a laugh he said: "Su Su, I [1] really don't have any other intentions. That type... that type of thing really shouldn't be allowed to remain inside that place. It will cause diarrhoea and a great deal of pain. You yourself... You can't bring yourself to do it anyway... If I really wanted to do something else, I would have done it on the bed, why would I wait until now?"

So saying, he took a few steps towards Su Yi, hugged him and said: "Su Su, I know

that you're shy but there's nothing for it, for the sake of your little stomach bear with it for a while." After saying this, with the speed of wind, his hand shot out and struck several of Su Yi's acupoints to immobilize him and arranged his body so that Su Yi was leaning forward on his knees, with his head resting on Wanyan Xu's shoulder [2]. After making sure that Su Yi's head was totally clear of the water, only then did Wanyan Xu carefully part those long and slender legs. Looking down, he could see that the small opening had become red and swollen and flakes of dried blood stained the surface. Already loosened from being soaked in water, after he rubbed them lightly, the flakes promptly dissolved and vanished into the water.

Wanyan Xu gazed attentively at the little cavity that had provided him with fathomless pleasure, while slowly dragging the tip of his finger over the gathered folds in swirling motions, he sighed and said: "Poor little thing, it has become so swollen. I feel distressed too when I look at it, but after we do that a few more times, it will not be so delicate anymore." So saying, he gently extended a finger into that channel. Because it had already been lubricated with ointment and his own semen, his finger was able to slip in without much effort. Following that, a stream of white fluid was squeezed out, slowly dissipating when it met the water.

If Su Yi's acupoints had not been sealed, at this time, he would probably have bitten off his tongue in an attempt at suicide. He had not felt such intense shame even when he had been buffeted by lust into losing control in the bedroom just now. At this time, he would not have been restrained from attempting to end his life even if his own mother, father and brothers were being threatened, let alone those close friends and relatives that Wanyan Xu had kept imprisoned in his prison. It was fortuitous for Su Yi that in truth, Wanyan Xu only had the intention of cleaning the residual semen from him, and was not trying to take liberties or toy with him. After a few pumps of his finger, the flow of white liquid lessened and eventually stopped but unfortunately, the thing on his own lower half was now standing up tall again.

After he had meticulously given that opening another thorough rinse, he could see that even the swelling had subsided substantially. However, Wanyan Xu could feel the flames of desire scorching his own body again. Feeling awkward, he looked at Su Yi and saw that Su Yi was glowering at him unhappily. He hurried to put on a

smile and said: "Su Su, that... I... I was just thinking... as you can see, night has just fallen... why not... why don't we do it one more time?" As he was saying that, he was undoing Su Yi's acupoints at the said time. No longer silenced, Su Yi ground out these words behind his gritted teeth: "Do it o more time? And then you will accompany me here and wash me out like this again?"

Looking at Su Yi's demeanour, Wanyan Xu thought to himself that if he really attempted to do it again that night, Su Yi would either be angry enough to attempt to devour him or he would try to kill himself by severing his tongue. He gave a long sigh, reminding himself that, alas, he really couldn't afford to rile up his beloved too much, otherwise even if he really did have those people held hostage in his prison, it would be of no use. With a disappointed face, he could only say mournfully: "Then... alright, it's not a big deal if we don't do it again." He accompanied these words with dramatically tragic sighs, as if the legendary Potion of Immortality had been placed right before his eyes, but he could not partake of it. Then, he carried Su Yi out of the pool where palace maids were ready and waiting to hand over things like towels and combs.

Su Yi had already been fatigued by the sex --- his back was sore and his legs were shaky --- in addition that, the fiddling of his body by Wanyan Xu while they were soaking in the pool had further sapped his strength. Wanyan Xu took a towel and rubbed his body dry, and then helped him into a white sleeping robe that reached to the floor. It was loosely fastened with a band of intricately worked brocade and its collar was tailored to be draped in a semi-open style. Thus dressed, he projected an indefinable glamour; coupled with the noble way he carried himself --- lofty and as unsullied as freshly fallen snow --- he appeared so graceful that he did not seem to be of this earth and Wanyan Xu could only stare at him as if he had been entranced. Two of the palace maids came forward to assist in combing their hair, but were prevented from doing so by Wanyan Xu who picked up a comb and began to attend to Su Yi's hair himself. Su Yi's luxuriant hair fell to his waist like a sheet of the finest black satin, the silken strands were soft and shiny, extremely pliable to the touch and Wanyan Xu couldn't resist playing with it as he combed.

As he was stroking Su Yi's hair admiringly, he also said: "On the day of your capture,

when I tormented you by making you walk in the wake of the war chariots, the thing that left the deepest impression on me was this head of long hair. Under the light of the sun, it actually appeared to have a dark green tint. But after a few days of walking, your hair seemed to have dried out --- it had taken on a yellowish hue --- and I began to feel a bit worried that it would be ruined forever; luckily it seems to have regained its vitality in the end. Su Su, as the owner of this fine head of hair, your own strength should not be its lesser, should it?"

Su Yi gave a "humph", he understood perfectly well that Wanyan Xu was borrowing this opportunity to counsel him to get over this trial and try to cheer up but Su Yi was unable to see how he could possibly do that. With impatience, he said: "Have you finished combing or not? If you don't know how to do it properly then let others do it." Looking into the mirror, he watched as Wanyan Xu picked up a lock of his hair, after looping it a few times he secured it with a hairpin carved out of white jade [3]. The contrast of black hair with white hairpin was especially alluring, and made Su Yi appear as charming as the finest jade. Of course, none of these musings would have ever occurred to Su Yi and he stood up silently. Wanyan Xu rushed to carry him up again and the two returned together to the bed chamber.

Su Yi was lying on the bed lost in his own thoughts, but when he noticed that Wanyan Xu had the jade box in his hands again, he cried out in consternation: "You... you... you promised that tonight you won't again... again..." But he could not finish the sentence because he was unable to bring himself to utter the rest of the shameful words.

Wanyan Xu saw that Su Yi was greatly distressed and hurried to explain: "No, it's not what you think, this box has two layers, the first one is that ointment I used just now, the other layer contains a medicine that has healing properties. You were bleeding from that area and it was red and swollen. Once this medicine is applied to it, the pain will vanish at speed and you will feel exceedingly comfortable. Su Su, endure it a while longer, once the medicine has been applied you can have a good sleep. Otherwise, it would be hard to tell how much pain you will have to suffer, or how uncomfortable you will be tonight. I am absolutely not trying to deceive you; this drug is extremely effective and precious. Come; turn your body over for the time being."

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At first, Su Yi refused to turn over and his back passage really began to hurt as if it had been set aflame. But when he considered that Wanyan Xu had already done plenty of even more shameful things to him in the bathroom, and his state of extreme discomfort, he decided not to resist when Wanyan Xu made a move to flip him onto his stomach. His behaviour was so unexpected to Wanyan Xu that he was momentarily stunned; it was a long while before a big smile began to blossom on his face and he carefully parted Su Yi's butt cheeks. With his finger, he carefully applied and worked the ointment onto that red and swollen chrysanthemum.

A while later, he could hear Su Yi mumbling, as if to himself: "Is this medicine really worth anything? To think that it was said to be extremely precious... Bah!" Unable to resist, he gave an audible laugh, he found his Su Su extremely adorable when he was being disagreeable and peevish. Of course, from Su Yi's point of view, he did not think he was being disagreeable or peevish at all. He believed that what he was doing was expressing rejection; that he was unequivocally rejecting Wanyan Xu, and the medicine he was holding in his hand.

But soon, he had to admit, grudgingly, that when Wanyan Xu had said that this medicine was extremely precious, there must have been some truth to his words. His backside, which had been burning up as if it had been splattered with chilli sauce, felt cool and refreshed upon the application of the ointment; the sensation was indeed extremely comfortable. He watched as Wanyan Xu put the box away and then came to lie down on the bed. Snuggled against Su Yi, he said with a contented smile: "All set, go to sleep, you must be tired."

Su Yi struggled for a bit, then after a while, with his face flushed red, he angrily said: "Aren't you going to let me put on my clothes?"

At the moment, Wanyan Xu was relishing being pressed close to Su Yi, bare skin against bare skin; at the same time he was entertaining himself by replaying in his

mind all the intimate scenes had happened just now, the vivid imagery was enough to cause his face to grow hot and his heart to pound. When Su Yi's sudden question interrupted his happy daydreams, without thinking twice, he let slip what was on his mind: "Su Su, there's no need for that. If we go to sleep now, maybe when we wake up at the third or fourth watch, we can do it again." Only after the words left his mouth did he realise what he had actually said. Horrified and alarmed, he rolled off the bed and on to the ground. It was just as well that he had done so while he had the chance, because Su Yi had rapidly aimed a violent kick at his family jewels that would have likely ruined them for good had the blow connected.

Su Yi look enraged enough that he might take leave of all other considerations and give full vent to his anger. Wanyan Xu looked at him contritely from the floor but said cheekily: "Su Su, how could you harbour intentions of murdering your very own dear husband on the very night of our wedding?" He hauled himself back to his feet and retrieved Su Yi's underclothes, only to discover that they had been reduced to strips of fabric. "Heh heh" he gave a couple of hollow laughs and looked at Su Yi, only to discover that his beloved's face had become the colour of ash. Wanyan Xu hurried to console him, saying: "Don't worry, don't worry, I'll go fetch a fresh set of clothes for Su Su now." So saying, he skipped outside the room, raising his voice, he called out: "Fetch me another set of underclothes." The curtains over the door promptly parted, and Zi Nong emerged into the room bearing undershirt and underpants made of snowy white satin.

When Wanyan Xu saw that it was her, he was deeply astonished and said: "Why have you come here? You should be in the banquet hall attending to the honoured guests. The dinner banquet shouldn't have ended so early."

Zi Nong covered her mouth with her sleeve to hide her smile and said: "It was Her Majesty the Empress Dowager who ordered your humble servant to come over here to attend to Your Majesty's needs. But your humble servant was thinking that I should come over anyway, Master has been practicing restraint for so long, trying to keep your heart free of lust. Since you would be able to finally unleash your desires tonight, you would inevitably be impatient. Your humble servant has come prepared." So saying, she handed a fresh change of clothes to Wanyan Xu.

Wanyan Xu rewarded her with a baleful glare, knowing full well that her words would have been clearly heard by Su Yi. With a “humph”, he said: “Don't just stand there and boast, if I [1] find out that you've made any mistakes, see how I shall punish you.” So saying, he quickly re-entered the bedroom. Trying to mollify Su Yi, he gave a fawning smile and said: “Su Su, that... I've brought the clothes... do you want me, as your husband, to help you dress... Aiyo!”

The cause of his yelp was that Su Yi, in a state of great agitation and acting almost unconsciously, had flung a pillow [2] at him as a weapon. Su Yi was a practitioner of martial arts, and had infused the pillow with his inner force [3], thus the pillow had the weight and velocity of a stone hammer as it travelled through the air. Wanyan Xu was so scared that he was reduced to covering his head and cowering ignominiously. Just that, although this was the move of an enraged man, the object that had been thrown was still ultimately nothing more than a pillow. Wanyan Xu's extreme but genuine reaction actually served as an ice-breaker and the atmosphere between the two relaxed and became more congenial as Su Yi's pervasive sadness and awkwardness was diluted.

Su Yi still glared threateningly at Wanyan Xu, however, and did not allow him to get close to his body again. Poor Wanyan Xu might have been the master of an entire country and he might have projected awe-inspiring dignity and power when holding court, but at this moment in the bedroom, he had become a hen-pecked husband, all because of his emotional attachment to Su Yi. Since his lust had been sated enough for the night, he grudgingly took a blanket from the bed and feeling very sorry for himself, he proceeded to settle onto a couch in the bedroom and had a very unrestful night of sleep. Considering that it had been dusk when they had finished consummating their marriage, their wedding night, which should have lasted all through the night under the illumination of ornamented candles, could be counted as having been wasted.

As the saying goes, “the spring night is bitterly short and they rose only when the sun was high in the sky” [4]. Su Yi tossed and turned the whole night, unable to find rest. Finally, just as the sky was beginning to brighten with the approach of dawn, he

finally managed to fall into a deep sleep through sheer fatigue. Only when Wanyan Xu heard him breathing evenly did he dare to sneak onto the bed and enfold his beloved into his arms, thus satisfying his craving to be near to Su Yi for a while. By that time, song of roosters had long since signalled the end of the fifth watch. Outside, the attending eunuch, whose duty was to wake the emperor, gave a soft cough and said in a low voice: "Your Majesty, it is time to attend court."

Wanyan Xu really did not wish to stray even half a step from Su Yi's side, but as the master of the country, he couldn't be irresponsible and act rashly. He had always practiced strict self-discipline, furthermore, the lesson he had learned from the example of the last disastrous monarch of the previous dynasty had made a deep impression on him. Therefore, he forced himself to get up from the bed, saying morosely: "I know. All of you, go to the outer room and wait on me there. Let Zi Nong come in, she can attend to the Empress when he wakes up."

When the word "Empress" left his lips, a feeling of utter felicity and contentment suffused his heart, brain, and all three-thousand six-hundred and fifty pores [5], he even walked with a lighter step. As he floated in a cloud of happiness to the adjoining room, Zi Liu rushed up and joined the rest of the servants. After they finished grooming and dressing him, he proceeded to the Outer Court. At the same time, Zi Nong had rushed to the Garden of Merriment, ready to attend to Su Yi when he awoke.

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Time flew by, and the sun was already shining brightly overhead when Su Yi began to squirm around in bed and gradually awaken. He shifted slightly, but even such a small movement made him hurt, it seemed as though there wasn't a single part of his body that did not ache, his bones in particular seemed as though they had been shattered and could no longer provide a framework for his body. As he was struggling to get up from the bed, Zi Nong came in. Bearing down on him gently, she prevented him from rising and said: "Empress Consort please rest for a while, let Zi Nong sooth and warm up your muscles and tendons before you try to get up again."

She suddenly say Su Yi look up at her, with a hint of entreaty in his eyes, he said: "Miss Zi Nong, please don't address me like that. Could you please keep on calling me Young Master instead?"

Zi Nong's heart skipped a beat and she immediately understood that Su Yi was still unable to accept what had happened. With a heavy heart, she forced a smile and said: "Of course I can. You have already become our... we should carry out all your instructions faithfully. Besides, I'm used to addressing you as Young Master, after such a long time, it's also difficult for me to change the way I address you." So saying, she called over a few palace maids, together they helped him to wash up and dress. They sent for his breakfast, and after he had eaten, Zi Nong asked Su Yi: "Does Young Master have any further instructions?"

Su Yi was silent for a long time before he suddenly spoke: "I wish to go to the prison to visit... visit them." Before the sound of his voice had faded, Zi Nong said urgently: "There's nothing interesting there to see." When she saw that Su Yi was giving her a puzzled look, she hurriedly tried to calm her flustered self down and gave him a smile before turning back to straighten out the bedding and freshen the bed, saying at the same time: "Your humble servant means to say that Young Master's body is still not feeling well and even in the best of circumstances, the jail is not a nice place to be. Besides, those people should have returned to their homes by now. I distinctly heard his Majesty instruct Zi Nan to release those prisoners yesterday."

When Su Yi noticed that she looked shifty, also that her words were evasive, his heart began to fill with doubts and suspicions. He did not betray any hint of them on his face however, and he said placidly: "Is that so? Well then, please fetch a few books for me to read." At his words, a genuinely happy smile brightened Zi Nong's face and she said: "Yes, I'll do so immediately." But just when she had left, Zi Liu stepped into the room shortly after. Pausing to look around for a moment, she asked inquisitively: "Young Master, did Zi Nong not come here?"

Su Yi replied: "She just left, were you looking for her for a specific reason?" He heard her reply: "Yes, I need to get some money from her." After the words left her lips and she realised that they sounded a bit off, she quickly looked at Su Yi and hurried to

clarify: "Zi Nong... Of the four of us, she's the one who is in charge of monitoring all the expenses and handling money in the palace, the Emperor's concubines take no part in these matters. But Young Master, ah, no, it should be Empress Consort... since you have become the Empress, if you wish to take charge of these matters in future, the job would be yours by right."

When she noticed that Su Yi was looking at her with gleaming eyes, she suddenly realised that she might have said too much. Feeling guilty, she gave a dry laugh and quickly said: "About that... Empress Consort... your humble servant still has other tasks to attend to, if you have no further instructions, I will leave to tend to them."

Su Yi was even more astonished, what exactly was happening today? The Zi Liu he had come to know always managed to keep her composure and remain calm even during the most important and unexpected events, today was the first time he had ever seen her flustered. There was something fishy at play here. In his mind, he was speculating over what it might be, but he knew perfectly well that this was not something that they would let him know just for the asking; they must be induced to speak by other means. When Zi Nong returned with the requested books, Su Yi only read for a while, before his body seemed to feel tired and drowsy and he reclined to rest his eyes for a bit and also to go over in his mind Zi Liu and Zi Nong's strange behaviour.

Could it possibly be that Wanyan Xu had already executed all those people, but decided to keep the truth from him? When this thought occurred to him, he immediately dismissed it as impossible, reasoning in his heart that they were still more useful alive than dead to Wanyan Xu. If they were alive they could still be used to threaten Su Yi, but he could get no mileage if they were dead. If he killed them, not only would he lose this most reliable tool, but he would also not be able to produce them if Su Yi called his bluff and demanded to see them as evidence that he had kept his promise. Furthermore, in his heart he still believed that although Wanyan Xu could be cold and ruthless, it was because he had been the ruler for quite some time and had accustomed himself to not letting his emotions dictate his actions, becoming somewhat hard-hearted in the process. However, he did not believe that Wanyan Xu was totally depraved or without conscience.

When he thought over what had transpired on that day carefully, from the way Wanyan Xu shifted his focus from one hostage to the next, he probably just wanted to force Su Yi to agree to become his Empress and did not really have any desire to kill them. Maybe even if Su Yi had managed to harden his heart and steadfastly refuse, he might not have been able to carry out his threat anyway. When Su Yi thought of this, he could not help but feel some regret but he knew quite clearly that if the same situation occurred again or if he were to be given a chance to relive it, the result would be the same. No matter the consequences, he would never dare to gamble with the lives of those people.

The voice that answered her belonged to Zi Liu, in a happy tone she asked: “Has the Empress Consort really fallen asleep? He really gave me a scare just now and I almost let the cat out of the bag. Let's go some other place to speak, in case we disturb his sleep.”

Their footsteps gradually faded away as they left, but he could hear Zi Nong's voice as she instructed a palace maid: “Go spread the word to all the people in the palace, when they see the Empress, they are not to address him as the Empress Consort, rather, they should address him as Young Master.” Su Yi felt deeply grateful to Zi Nong as he furtively crept out of the window and followed the two maidens. Because he was now the Empress, the palace guards did not prevent him from leaving his room this time.

When he saw that the two had stopped and seated themselves at a little pavilion in the courtyard, he quickly dodged behind a large stone that was part of the decorative rockery. He heard Zi Liu give a long exhale before saying loudly: “Aiya, only now do I dare to say this openly. Today, you can finally reimburse me the money I paid to Young Master's friends and relatives as their salary for acting, surely?” [1]

Salary for acting? Su Yi's curiosity was further bestirred, and he listened even more intently as Zi Nong said: “I'm fine with it, but you have become so fixated on that little bit of silver. Harassing me for this makes you appear so stingy. If Young Master sees through the ploy because of this, I would like to know how you can account to our

Great King.”

Zi Liu laughed and said: “He's now the Emperor, but you still keep going Great King, Great King. I wasn't originally short of money, but I received a letter from my family. My parents wish to find a wife for my brother and build a new house for him. Although I cannot return to attend the ceremony but I should still send a gift and I also sent more to help support the family. That's why I suddenly lack money. Besides, as you know, His Majesty wanted Young Master's old friends and close neighbours to collude with him to put on a scene of potential murder in front of Young Master to force Young Master to agree to marry him. He agreed to pay each of them ten taels of silver, when you consider that there were at least twenty-odd people, the total cost was no small sum. I hardly managed to cobble it together. Hurry up and reimburse me, I still have a few debts to pay off too.”

Zi Nong retrieved a small ledger from her person, before she even had to ask, the other young woman had already offered her a brush and ink. As she wrote, she continued teasing Zi Liu: “The money you've worked so many years to earn must have been frittered away. You even have more avenues of income when compared to the rest of us, at least you can still prepare some precious herbs for sale. To come up with a sum of around two hundred taels of silver, you even had to resort to borrowing, if word gets out, who would believe it? Who knows what you have been spending money on...” Her speech was left unfinished, because they suddenly heard a steady but forbearing voice say: “That's right, I'm also interested in hearing about how more than two-hundred taels of silver was spent. Zi Liu and Zi Nong, what you've said had no proper start nor finish, now I'll have you both tell me the whole story from beginning to the end.”

When the two maidens heard that voice, they were so scared that their souls nearly departed their bodies and dissipated into thin air. As one, they turned to look in the direction of that voice, only to see Su Yi emerging from behind the rock with a face as grim as death.

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Although Su Yi tended to be blindly loyal, he was also an extremely bright and perceptive man. Listening to Zi Liu and Zi Nong, he could probably guess about seventy or eighty percent of what had happened. However, he simply found it incredibly difficult to believe that people who were close to him would conspire with Wanyan Xu to put on a show to deceive him, all for the sake of forcing him to promise to become Wanyan Xu's Empress.

Zi Liu and Zi Nong were scared of out their wits. Bewildered, they could only stand rooted to their spots and had not a clue about how to rectify the situation. Not daring to meet Su Yi's eyes, they could only stutter plaintively: "Young Master..." But besides those two words, they could not utter anything else.

Su Yi stared at them coldly before abruptly turning to leave. With a chilling smile, he said: "Alright, since neither of you are willing to tell me, I'll just go and ask Wanyan Xu. He, at least, should be able to give me a complete explanation." So saying he started to walk away but suddenly, two shadows flashed past him. When he blinked and looked carefully, he realised that Zi Nong and Zi Liu were now kneeling in front of him, clutching at the hem of his robes desperately. In tearful voices, they pleaded with him: "Young Master, please have mercy on us. If the Great King finds out that we were the ones who had revealed this matter, we would surely lose our lives. On account of the friendship we have with Young Master, we beg you to spare us."

When Su Yi saw that they were weeping, his heart immediately softened, halting his steps he said: "If you wish for me to spare you, you have to tell me everything about what happened on that day in detail. But rest assured, I shall not make any further inquiries to Wanyan Xu. If you refuse, don't blame me for not taking into consideration our friendship." After saying that, he helped the two of them up and saw them exchange a meaningful look. After that, Zi Nong said: "Since Young Master has put it that way, your humble servant does not dare to hoodwink Young Master any longer. But Young Master, we should go to the pavilion for you to take a seat before we begin to explain everything to you thoroughly." So saying, they flanked Su Yi and proceeded to have a seat in the pavilion.

Zi Nong shot Zi Liu another glance, looking for confirmation, before she proceeded to say: "Since matters have come to this, we can only tell you the truth, but we beseech you to never let His Majesty know. That night when you sought to join your country in death by slitting your own throat, your actions truly made His Majesty livid. When he returned to the Royal Study, he immediately sent for the Minister He, who is the high official in charge of the Ministry of Justice and ordered him to find out all the old friends and close neighbours you have that are living in this city and round them up so that he could use them to threaten you."

"But who could have predicted that three days later, when without a single exception, Minister He had covertly apprehended all the people you have close ties to, His Majesty's rage had already abated somewhat. When he saw that among the captives, there were many such people like infirm elders, little children and pregnant women, he knew that they were indeed ideal for the purpose of forcing your agreement. However, he could not bring himself to actually harm them. His Majesty knew that you would certainly not wait for any one of them to actually come to harm before you capitulate, but from the looks of those people, he also knew that none of them could withstand a fright. If any of them collapsed or died of fright, not only would he be unable to account to you but it would also be a heinous deed that would offend Heaven and defy all reason. So he released them from prison, and had them ushered to a small building on the palace grounds instead where he proceeded to tell them about his scheme. He also used flawed logic to persuade them, saying that after you have become the Empress, Jin Liao and Great Qi will become one family, and in future the Jin Liao people will have no grounds to throw their weight around and oppress the people of Qi."

"When those people heard his words, they did become somewhat pleased, but they were reluctant to deceive you. But His Majesty then said that he would have you as his Empress no matter what. If they refused to act in the play he had scripted, he would still proceed with his plan; the only difference would be that what was originally supposed to be an act would become reality. He would rather not do that because it would be disastrous if anyone really did get hurt at that point. Just as they were dithering, one of the pregnant women --- the very one who had been your

playmate all throughout your youth --- proved herself to be of decisive character. Without consulting anyone else, she stood up and promised to go along with His Majesty's plan."

"The Great King was also exceedingly delighted, and promised them that as long as you agree to become the Empress, every one of them will be rewarded with ten taels of silver. Even if you managed to turn your heart into stone and turn a blind eye to their fate, he guaranteed that he will harm not a single one of them. As a result, those people stopped hesitating; they even said that ten taels of silver was no small sum. Under the reign of the previous Emperor, that amount of money was what they could expect to earn in two or three years of labour, thus all of them were happy with the offer. After that... After that, well, Young Master already knows what transpired later. That is, the act put on by those people and His Majesty was very convincing, and you were taken in by them."

Zi Liu added: "That's not necessarily the case. By that time, Young Master had been starving for a few days, with the inevitable result that your judgement and willpower had been impaired. With the additional stress of the situation, your heart would have been panicked and your thoughts scattered. Even if their acting had been lacking, you would not have been able to pick up on it. But those people also did not do that with the intention of betraying Young Master, they really did not have a choice. With or without their consent, they were fated to participate in the play that His Majesty had planned but if they did not choose to cooperate there was a possibility that they could end up losing their lives. Young Master should not blame them, or condemn them for being despicable, or complain that they disregarded your close relationship when they deceived you. If it had been me, I would also have seen it to be the only reasonable decision."

When the two maidens had finished speaking, they sneaked a look at Su Yi's face and tried to gauge his feelings, only to discover that he was wearing the same placid expression that he usually wore. With no inkling as to what Su Yi's thoughts might be, they could only wait anxiously. Suddenly, Su Yi heaved a sigh, as if thinking aloud, he said: "So that's how it is. As I thought, he is indeed not capable of such depravity."

The two maidens looked mutely at each other with an attitude of amazement --- now that Young Master knows the truth, not only did he not harbour any rancour towards His Majesty and his own friends for deceiving him but his expression seems to be one of relief. And then they heard Su Yi say: "From the looks of it, Wanyan Xu actually had good intentions, why then did he not tell me the truth after it was all over? When I said that I would go to ask him about this personally, the both of you immediately became so frightened. Previously, I only hated him for being devoid of conscience because of this incident. But why didn't he reason that if he told me the truth, I would still retain a measure of good feelings towards him?"

Zi Nong answered: "His Majesty did think that way, but he said that you would never believe him. He felt that if he tried to tell you the truth, you would not only hate him but you would also start to suspect him. He said that he would rather that you think of him as having a cold and heartless nature before he lets you think of him as being duplicitous and untrustworthy, someone who specialized in lying and cheating. Because of these reasons, he also forbade us from revealing to Young Master the truth behind the deception, in case you suspect that he was using us to rehabilitate your opinion of him. Moreover, although you could say that your close friends were forced into it, but in the end they still accepted the silver and put on a show to mislead you. His Majesty was afraid that you would take their betrayal hard, that you would not recognise that they had been placed in an untenable position, and be heartbroken by their deceit."

"With these two factors in mind, he commanded us to keep this knowledge strictly confidential but it seems that the saying is right, there really isn't a wall in the word that does not bear even a single crack, in the end Young Master still found out about this secret. Now we can only implore Young Master to take pity on us, we cannot stress enough how important it is that Young Master pretends to have no knowledge of the truth. If His Majesty should find out that we were the ones who had given the game away, we would meet a tragic end and even after death, we would not be allowed proper burials." With that, they knelt down together and cried, their faces filled with genuine terror.

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Su Yi tried to help them up and said: "Don't worry, I am certainly not one to go back on my word, I will just continue to behave like I know nothing of this matter. But the two of you are too negative, even if Wanyan Xu discovers that you had inadvertently revealed the truth of the matter, the two of you are among his most trusted and favoured aides, how could he demand that you compensate for your error through death?"

Zi Liu said: "Young Master may not know this, but we have been with His Majesty since our childhoods and have shared many a laugh and pranks with him. But there is one area in which we are not allowed any leniency, that is, all of His Majesty's instructions must be carried out to perfection. If we deviate from his directive even a little, a heavy punishment cannot be avoided. That day, His Majesty already declared that whoever slips up and causes the truth to be uncovered by Young Master should be ready to have their heads roll. Admittedly, it was to warn us to always be vigilant and emphasized the seriousness of the matter. But if we really commit this mistake, His Majesty might not have mercy. He often says that as his most trusted aides who have also been with him for many years, he naturally would spoil and pamper us, to an extent that is almost unheard of for servants. But if we don't even attach importance to his orders and follow them to the letter, then he has treated us well in vain and has only caused us to become arrogant. He has no further use for such servants and would not keep them around. Therefore although we normally treat him with familiarity regardless of the difference in our social station, but we do not dare to defy his orders even a little."

Su Yi had no ready reply, in his heart he felt that although it was rather cruel of Wanyan Xu to handle matters like this, he also had to admit that his method of managing his aides was correct. This man was really not simple at all. As he was thinking these things over, he felt that his feelings towards Wanyan Xu were becoming increasingly complicated, at this very moment, he did not even know if he should hate or respect Wanyan Xu. He could only help the two maidens up and said:

“All right, get up, I will never let him know what happened today.”

Zi Nong and Zi Liu were filled with immense gratitude and Zi Liu suddenly said: “Your humble servant will remember Young Master's kindness and magnanimity as long as I live. I have heard of Young Master's reputation as a benevolent and righteous man even in Jin Liao, before the war. Now that you have become our Empress, the both of us are happy and convinced that you are ideal for that position, but I have to give a word of warning to Young Master. I have previously heard from Zi Nan that Zi Yan was extremely dissatisfied with the decision to crown you as Empress. Aii, although the four of us are like sisters to each other, our characters and temperament are very different. She is someone who never looks back once her mind has been made up, if she has decided on something, even His Majesty would be unable to dissuade her. Therefore, your humble servant is afraid that she would be deleterious to you and wishes to remind Young Master ten-thousand times that you should always be extremely careful.”

Su Yi nodded his head and said: “Thank you for the warning, I will be sure to be more cautious.”

But in his heart he thought: *I am a Great Qi national, moreover I was also a prisoner of war, by right I should never have become the Empress. Miss Zi Yan is afraid that I will lead Wanyan Xu astray and naturally, she is dissatisfied. If she wishes to dispose of me, it would be good --- if it will allow me to shed the title of Empress, I would be willing to even lose my life. I would be the first one to offer her my gratitude for such an act.*

Although these were his true feelings, he made no mention of them and he was accompanied by Zi Nong as he went back to his palace while Zi Liu departed to attend to Wanyan Xu.

A few concubines had made an appointment with him and were waiting in his residence to pay Su Yi their respects, they smilingly said: “We should have come earlier, but we thought that Young Master must have been enjoying His Majesty's favour until late last night and might not get up early today. That's why we have

waited until now to come here. Truth be told, words cannot describe how considerate His Majesty is of Young Master. Early this morning, he dispatched a servant to the residence of the Empress Dowager to say that Young Master is feeling tired and would not be going over there to pay respects today. We have just come from the Empress Dowager's palace and heard this personally so we made an appointment to come over here to greet you instead."

When Su Yi heard those words, he felt that a large rock had taken up residence in his heart. He could neither force it down nor spit it up, so embarrassed that he felt ashamed and unable to show his face. The concubines then realised that he was feeling bashful and discomfited and stopped teasing him, and instead chatted to him about other things. Suddenly, a voice was heard from beyond the window: "Has my Mother Empress woken up yet? Your son and subject [1] has specially come to pay my respects, heh."

That Su Yi wished nothing more than to bite down in frustration was not surprising, but upon hearing that voice, the gathered concubines became aghast and their faces blanched with fright. With all haste, they stood up; judging by their behaviour they longed for a hole to open up in the ground so that they burrow into it for refuge.

Su Yi thought in his heart: *It seems that that little devil has so terrorised these people that they have become utterly intimidated by him. Well, if he thinks of me as being of the same mettle as them, he is sorely mistaken. Wanyan Xu is inept when it comes to teaching his son, today I will administer a lesson in his stead to this little Crown Prince of Jin Liao and have him learn how he should behave himself.*

He watched as Wanyan Shuo charged through the door full of high-spirits and excitement, the smile on his face becoming even more animated when he noticed the presence of the concubines. In a loud voice he said: "Oh, so my Mother Concubines are here too. Wow, almost the full roster is here, almost like you have all received personal invitations." So saying, after he swept his eyes over each and every one of them, he said: "Why is Concubine Yin not here? She is too self-important, even if we don't consider that she has already lost favour with my Royal Father. She would still not be as important as the Empress, even if she still enjoys

his favour. Hehe, this is a significant breach of protocol, she has shown such disrespect for her betters.” After these passing remarks, he looked at Su Yi and said: “Mother Empress, don't be angry, I will go and retrieve her right now for you to vent your anger.” So saying, he really turned to leave.

Su Yi gave a “humph” before saying: “Don’t leave yet, I have something to ask you. Why have you come here?”

Immediately, Wanyan Shuo stared at him with a pair of wide eyes, with an air of great astonishment, as if Su Yi was making a fuss over a small matter, he said: “Why have I come? Mother Empress, do you really have to ask? Naturally it is to pay my respects.”

Su Yi nodded and said: “Then I'll have to thank you for keeping me in your thoughts. That will do, now that you have paid your respects you can return, you do not need to concern yourself with my affairs.”

Before the sound of his voice had time to fade, Wanyan Shuo, full of zest, said: “Mother Empress, what you said is not quite correct, not only have I come to greet you, but I am to stay here to listen to your teachings. Since you are now the Mother of the Nation, and I am the Crown Prince, you are naturally responsible for my education and guidance.” As he was speaking, he was rubbing his hands together in glee, in his heart he thought: *I won't make it so easy for you to get rid of me so quickly.*

What he did not know was that Su Yi was actually waiting for him to say exactly this. With a glance at the congregation of concubines, who were still trembling with fear, Su Yi said: “All of you, please return to your own residences. I have to devote my energy to the serious business of the Crown Prince's education.” So saying he stood up, the broad smile he was wearing on his face aroused deep suspicion in Zi Nong's heart. She thought to herself: *The little Crown Prince is too impertinent --- if the tiger does not demonstrate his might, he treats it like a weak kitten --- looks like this time, he will be at a disadvantage.*

Among the concubines, there were a few genuinely kind souls. They were anxious for Su Yi, and kept turning back to cast worried glances at him as they left. Su Yi strode to stand in front of Wanyan Shuo and said: "Since I now bear the responsibility for bringing you up well, then you should come with me now." After saying that, he turned and headed out of the room.

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Here, we must remember the kind of child Wanyan Shuo was. Precocious and devious, he was just like a cunning little fox cub. When he saw that Su Yi was assuming such an unexpected demeanour after his teasing --- one wholly without shame or distress --- his alert mind registered that something unusual was about to happen and his heartbeat quickened and became stronger, like a drum had replaced his heart. He murmured to himself: "Don't tell me that I pushed him too hard and now he's determined to subdue me." Sneaking another glance at Su Yi's face, he grew even more convinced that his hunch was correct and decided that it was time to apply the metaphorical oil to his soles for speed and beat a hasty retreat. He put on a winning smile and said: "Ah, Mother Empress, about that lesson... Your son and subject has suddenly remembered that there is an important thing that he has neglected to do, your son and subject must retire first to attend to that matter." So saying, he turned and was about to take to his heels and escape.

Su Yi gave a cold laugh. Although his expertise in martial arts was greatly inferior when compared to Wanyan Xu's level of mastery, he was still a highly-skilled practitioner in his own right. Although Wanyan Shuo was fond of training in martial arts, he was still a small child and was of course no match for Su Yi. He only had time to give one yelp of "Aiyo!" as Su Yi caught him by his collar before he found himself dangling in the air, with Su Yi still holding onto his collar. Su Yi leaned closer to him before saying laughingly: "What's that important matter? Was it to steal eggs from birds' nests or was it to cause trouble for that concubine? I distinctly remember that you should be attending lessons with the Imperial Tutor at this time, how could there be another matter that needs your urgent attention?" With that said, he tossed the boy to Zi Nong and said: "Follow me, and bring him along."

Zi Nong answered in the affirmative, keeping a firm grip on Wanyan Shuo who was still trying to engineer an escape, she said softly to him: “Your Highness, it’s not that Big Sister does not want to help you. Although Young Master is usually genial and mellow, but when his anger has been provoked, he is extremely dangerous. Even His Majesty might have to make some concessions when he is like that. You should just be resigned to your fate, it’s your fault that you chose to provoke him for fun anyway.” They followed behind Su Yi, until they came to the small study room that was used for Wanyan Shuo’s lessons.

At the moment, the two Imperial Tutors were drinking tea and chatting. Wanyan Shuo disliked attending class, and these two tutors were also happy that they could take it easy when he decided to skip his lessons. Their lax attitude towards their job suited Wanyan Shuo perfectly and was the only reason why the little devil did not scheme of ways of forcing them to relinquish their posts. All the tutors that he had had before were serious and dedicated, and they had all been forced to resign through his ploys. When Su Yi stepped into the room and witnessed for himself how the two conducted their business, he couldn’t help but to furrow his brows, thinking to himself: *how can people like them be considered suitable for the job of educating the next monarch?* Because his only intention had been to punish the little Crown Prince; and also because he was still ultimately unhappy and uncomfortable in his role as the new Empress, he did not give vent to such thoughts. Instead, he took a seat and said: “Crown Prince, didn’t you say that you wanted me to guide you? Today, I shall stay here and see how you go about your lessons.”

The two tutors already knew that the Emperor had gone to much trouble to wed the Empress and that he was the apple of the Emperor’s eye, constantly showered with the Emperor’s affection and favour. When the two of them saw that this very Empress Consort had arrived in the flesh and had witnessed their idleness, they were so terrified that they threw themselves to the ground and began kowtowing. They had only just regained their feet when they heard Su Yi say that he intended to stay in the study and observe Wanyan Shuo’s lesson. Of course, to try to demonstrate their industriousness, they tried to keep the Crown Prince at his lessons for a longer time, but Wanyan Shuo naturally refused to comply. Met with his

resistance and disobedience in front of the Empress, the Imperial Tutors were so anxious that cold sweat was beading on their brows.

By the end of the whole episode, Wanyan Shuo had experienced what Su Yi was capable of when he got serious and now knew how formidable he could be. To Wanyan Shuo's displeasure, not only did he dismiss these two slothful Imperial Tutors and he recall his former tutors, who Wanyan Shuo viewed as stodgy doddering old fellows who were always badgering him, but Su Yi also set Wanyan Shuo a task. If he couldn't complete it by the due date, he would be heavily punished by having to copy out *The Analects of Confucius* [1] five-hundred times. When he protested this treatment by saying: "Who are you to me, what gives you the right to control me like this", Su Yi immediately rebutted by borrowing his own words, saying: "That's a really funny question, am I not your Mother Empress? Since you had personally requested me to assume the responsibility of overseeing your education, how could I let you be disappointed?" Wanyan Shuo noticed that when the two words "Empress Mother" passed Su Yi's lips, they did so through gritted teeth and the expression that Su Yi was wearing gave him the distinct impression that Su Yi would like nothing more than to eat him for dinner. To Wanyan Shuo's chagrin, he came to the sad realisation that he had done something dumb; his actions had been so self-defeating that he might just as well have lifted up a large rock and dropped it on his own foot.

"Who knew that this Su Yi could be so vengeful!" Dolefully, he muttered this line quietly to himself, but when he looked at the departing Su Yi's receding back, he still could not admit defeat and said loudly: "You are going to so much trouble on my behalf, trying to educate me to become a wise and eminent ruler like my Imperial Father. Could it be that you no longer have any hopes of restoring the Great Qi?"

Su Yi did not bother to turn back, he only said coldly: "As your Imperial Father once said, 'the people are most important, the state is second, and the monarch is the least important. As long as the people can enjoy peace and prosperity, the specifics of who is on the Dragon Throne is not important.' I feel that there is some logic to his words. You should concentrate on your studies and learn well, don't disappoint the expectations I have of you."

Wanyan Shuo could only stare after him with utter bafflement. He had long known that Su Yi was not a simple character, but he was shocked because ever since his Imperial Father had taken up with Su Yi, he had only ever seen the pedantic side of Su Yi's personality. Although Wanyan Shuo knew that Su Yi could not be classed as being feeble or easily bullied, he thought that Su Yi only knew how to constantly grieve over his destroyed country, bemoan his lot in life, and indulge in self-pity and self-censure. No matter how he had tried, he had not been able to see how Su Yi's reputation as being outstandingly resourceful and surpassingly quick-witted was justified. That was the reason why he had the guts to bully and tease Su Yi to entertain himself in the first place, but it seems like he had badly misjudged this person and had been quickly served with his just desserts.

But the most pressing problem was this: If he didn't listen to Su Yi, all Su Yi had to do was give his Imperial Father a slight hint of what had happened and his Imperial Father, who had already long been dissatisfied with Wanyan Shuo's lackadaisical attitude towards his lessons, would certainly punish him severely. Hu Hu Hu.

By now, the reverence Zi Nong held for Su Yi could not possibly grow any deeper; as she accompanied him back to the Garden of Merriment, in her excitement, she chattered away merrily: "Young Master, I've never seen the Crown Prince be so obedient before, hahaha, he has finally experienced how formidable Young Master can be. You don't know the full extent of how undisciplined and out-of-control he can get. In the whole palace, His Majesty was the sole person that could ever control him, everybody else does not even dare to try. But His Majesty is always busy with other matters, and on account of the Crown Prince losing his mother at an early age and having many bouts of serious illnesses when he was younger, His Majesty inevitably tends to spoil him overmuch. Young Master, since he is also willing to listen to your directions now, you should also tell him not to keep bullying those long-suffering imperial concubines. But that is not an urgent matter, you can tell him that in future."

Su Yi gave a grunt and said: "He won't have the time to go harass anybody else, if he can do the task I set for him in time and meet all the stipulations, he will already

be considered accomplished, there won't be enough time for him to go gallivanting off to play. This child is really too atrocious, he catches onto people's weaknesses and does not let go, it's time for him to be taken in hand. Admittedly, Wanyan Xu has many important things that need his attention, but he should not have indulged his son to this extent."

As his words faded, he suddenly heard a gentle voice behind him. In a smiling tone, it said: "Yes yes yes, my dear Su Su, your husband admits his mistake, and wishes to thank you ten-thousand times for guiding Shuo Er on my behalf. You can have free reign over him, I [2] can only be grateful to you for your efforts." The two of them were startled and turned back, to be met with the sight of Wanyan Xu --- Heaven only knew when he had appeared --- standing right behind them, wearing a huge smile on his face and staring fixatedly at Su Yi with eyes that were filled with infinite love. He was only preoccupied with looking at his inamorato, what he did not know was that Su Yi was actually just about to look for him.

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Su Yi looked at Wanyan Xu. He looked at this man who he felt both high esteem and deep hatred for. He looked at this man who was born to be the bitterest enemy he would ever encounter but who was also the most intimate confidant that he would ever have in his life. He looked at this man who had originally wanted his life, but who now persistently tried to have his heart. At this moment, a feeling, one that he could not describe with his voice nor make sense of with his brain, slowly started to emanate from the bottom of his heart.

The feeling he should obviously have towards this man was one of bone-deep hatred that would cause him to grind his teeth at the very thought of him, so why was it that when he now saw Wanyan Xu, the first thought that came to his mind was the tenderness he had shown Su Yi during the humiliating ordeal last night, when he had tried so hard to restrain himself so as to make things easier on Su Yi. But if what he should do was to fall in love with this man, who would henceforth be the master of Su Yi's future, then why did the old grudge he bore against Wanyan Xu for destroying his country and taking him prisoner still loom so large in his thoughts? He

stood still, not moving from his spot, and kept looking at Wanyan Xu's face intently, trying desperately to puzzle out the numerous and disorderly thoughts and feelings that were coursing through him, but the more he tried to puzzle them out, the more puzzled he became.

“Zi Nong, I [1]... do I have rice on my face?” Wanyan Xu rubbed at his face anxiously. This is so strange; Su Su usually did not care to spare him even a single extraneous glance but Su Su was actually peering at him intently today. At this time, the only reason that Wanyan Xu could think of for his unusual behaviour was that there was something not quite right about his appearance.

As Su Yi looked at Wanyan Xu --- still rubbing his face self-consciously --- unbidden, his mind suddenly began to vividly imagine this man, who embodied the honour of the supreme ruler and the might of the imperial throne, going to a tiny hall in a small auxiliary palace and using both the carrot and the stick, entreated a bunch of ordinary citizens to cooperate with him in putting on a show, all for the sake of swindling someone into marrying him. He also imagined how Wanyan Xu might have looked as he paid each one of them their fee of ten taels of silver after the show. That unforgettable scene in the martial arts square, still carved in his bones and engraved in his heart, had always caused him gut-wrenching pain whenever his thoughts wandered to it. But when he recalled the scene now, for reasons that were a mystery to him, the pain seems to have been substantially diluted. Actually, when he thought of how Wanyan Xu had managed to give such a virtuoso performance on that day, he even found it very funny. As these thoughts were running through his mind, he couldn't contain the laugh that escaped from his lips.

Oh good heavens, what the hell was happening? Wanyan Xu stood stock still, as if he had been stunned by lightning exploding near him. Was... was this a joke, Su Su... Su Su he... he was actually smiling at him. He... he was really smiling at him. Overwhelmed by a rush of bliss, the sensation was too heady, rendering him immobile and he could feel nothing. His heart was filled with only one sound, the precious sound of Su Yi's laughter, and all he could think was that if he really did have rice on his face, then all he wished for was for more rice to appear there.

Su Yi also became immediately aware of his gaffe. Mortified, he gave a huffy "hai", and his whole face flushed a brilliant scarlet. He must be really ill, faced with this nemesis who had destroyed his country and forced Su Yi into marriage, he could actually laugh out loud. He found his own behaviour altogether inexcusable. Utterly perturbed with himself, he tossed his head and turned to go but his steps were dogged by Wanyan Xu who had finally recovered his wits. Su Su this, Su Su that, he incessantly babbled as they walked on.

"Wanyan Xu, is there nothing else that needs your attention? Why are you so idle? I don't believe that the world has suddenly become so peaceful." Since he couldn't shake Wanyan Xu --- who followed at his back like a piece of cow skin candy [2] that had adhered to his robes --- off, Su Yi finally turned back and questioned him with frustration. But unfortunately the man behind him had already taken leave of his senses because of that one laugh. As if his very soul had been bewitched by Su Yi, the besotted expression he was wearing caused even Zi Nong to feel ashamed on behalf of her master when she saw it.

"Ah, there were indeed some urgent matters, but I have already dealt with them all." After his trusted servant gave him a poke in the ribs, Wanyan Xu finally recovered some ability to think rationally and began to diligently give a report to the Empress about what he had achieved in the political arena: "Things are better now than they were in the past, most matters have been put back on track. It's not like when I first started to rule this land; that was such a messy time. I don't want to speak ill of a dead man, but I think that the Qi Emperor probably only knew how to eat, drink and make merry. His predecessor left a flourishing empire to him, but under his rule scenes of devastation played out all throughout the land, and the administration was in chaos. I managed to get things in order, first I lowered the taxes that the peasants had to pay in various regions, they had been raised to exorbitant levels by the Qi Emperor..."

He meant to continue enumerating his astute decisions so as to win Su Yi over, but he was interrupted by Su Yi, who only commented blandly: "Is that so? Then I would like to take a good look at how well you have governed the Great Qi for myself. Noon is fast approaching, why don't we leave the palace incognito and have our lunch in

the city? It's been five or six years since I left Dou Yan, I wonder if beef noodle shop that used to be my favourite is still open for business.”

When he said that, Zi Nong promptly understood that he still had some doubts as to whether Wanyan Xu could really do as he promised and accord the same rights and privileges to the citizens of the Great Qi that the people of his own ethnicity enjoyed and thus, he wanted an excuse to leave the palace so that he see with his own eyes how his people were living under Wanyan Xu's rule. Although they had passed through the city incognito when they first arrived, their route had been planned long in advance, if Wanyan Xu had wanted to plant agents to put on a show to cheat Su Yi, it would not have been impossible. Even taking into account Xu Jinhua's testimony, it was still hearsay.

But Wanyan Xu took his words at face value and got even more excited. While continuously nodding his head, he said: “Good idea, good idea. Su Su, although you are now the Empress, but I certainly would not condemn a person like you to the life of most consorts, where 'walking through the palace gates is like sinking into the ocean' [3]. I won't treat you like a woman and keep you locked up. I'll have people make arrangements right away and we can set off now. Don't worry, even if that shop has closed, I shall definitely track down the owner and set him up in business again.”

The three people chatted as they left. After they were gone from sight, a slim figure stepped out from behind a tree, it was none other than Zi Yan. A look of deep loathing marred her face and she muttered to herself: “Just as I thought, if this Su Yi is not eliminated, the fate of Jin Liao as a nation would be in jeopardy. It seems that Lord Yu's plan must really be put into motion, it's not complete yet but fortunately it's just the details still need to be fine-tuned.” Her mind made up and her course set, she also turned and left.

Du Yan was a large metropolis, and as the chosen seat of power for five dynasties, it had a rich history. The tyrannical Qi Emperor had brought this huge city to the brink of destruction, dealing it blow after blow with his self-serving policies, leaving its economy in ruins and its people insecure and panicked. But when Wanyan Xu

assumed rule over Dou Yan, the situation immediately became more stable and in time, the resilient and historic city began to flourish and prosper as it had in the past.

As Wanyan Xu, Zi Nong, and Su Yi wandered through the bustling streets, they could see that shops were open in great numbers and were doing brisk business. People thronged everywhere. Dou Yan did not seem to be the capital of a country that had just been defeated at all. Su Yi shot the man at his side a quick glance, remembering how he had crowed about his own accomplishments so enthusiastically. He couldn't say why, but although Wanyan Xu's fulsome praise for himself was extremely unseemly, when Su Yi saw that the common people were thriving under his reign, he did not even feel the slightest bit of distaste for his boastful behaviour. They found the beef noodle shop that Su Yi had frequented and sat down for a meal. While they were enjoying their meal, they also kept an ear out to listen to the gossip of the other patrons.

Whenever the gossip occasionally turned to the topic of the Jin Liao Emperor, all the three could hear were comments of admiration and praise for him. Wanyan Xu grew even more pleased with himself, only to hear Su Yi say suddenly: "Didn't you say that you have released all the hostages you had captured that time? Since we are free today, it is a good opportunity for me to go visit them. I can still remember clearly all of their addresses."

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It could be said that a mistimed remark could cause even Heaven and Earth to change their mood; upon hearing Su Yi's seemingly innocuous remark, Wanyan Xu's exultant comportment immediately changed. Like a mouse that had just spied a fierce hound close by, he began to cower, his previously gleeful high-spirits and bragging quickly replaced by a hemming and hawing stutter: "That... that... Su Su... you... you still... still don't trust... don't trust me [1]? What... what is there... that is so nice to see... the day... the day is getting late... we... should go back."

Zi Nong was also terrified by the prospect, her usually rosy cheeks turned white and

when she heard her Master's words, she hurried to echo his protests and said:
“That’s right, Young Master, your humble servant is willing to guarantee with her life that those people are fine. His Majesty's words are reasonable, it is getting late. It is not right that we should leave the palace incognito for a jaunt in the city in the first place, to return back late would be even more unforgivable.”

But Su Yi heart was set on carrying out his plan, with a light chuckle he said: “Don't you feel that all your words would only serve to increase the misgivings I already have?” So saying, he ignored the two of them and left, heading towards the old neighbourhood where he used to reside.

Oh Young Master, whatever happens, you have to be clever. I pray ten-thousand times that you will not reveal the secret that Zi Liu and I share. These were Zi Nong's thoughts as she walked behind Su Yi, her anxiety rising the more she thought. She cast a look at her Master who was walking beside her, when she saw that he was wearing a similarly forlorn expression, in her heart she felt that there was something she did not quite understand. Stealthily, she touched him lightly and in a very small voice she asked: “Master, if Young Master learns the truth, it will only be advantageous to you. Why are you putting on such a gloomy face, is it really necessary?”

With wide eyes, Wanyan Xu looked at Zi Nong, in a lowered voice, he chided her: “Idiot, what advantage is there. If he had discovered the truth at the scene that day, maybe there would have been a possibility that he would have felt a bit comforted by the knowledge that I am not someone who is devoid of conscience. But now, the impression he has of me as a vicious and remorseless monster is firmly imprinted on his heart. Besides, because of this ploy, he has been forced to become the Empress, at this point of time if he manages to find those people and learn that they had joined forces with me to fool him, won't this... won't this mean that in his eyes, I will be guilty of yet another transgression? Also this charge being guilty of deception is not to be taken lightly, if he lets his imagination run wild, he might think that the love I have for him is just another one of my deceits. What do you... what do you think we should do now?”

Stupefied and dumbstruck, Zi Nong could only stare at her Master, who she had always found to be brilliant and farsighted man of meticulous methods, and thought: *Heavens, Master doth think too much*. Then, she heard Wanyan XU murmuring softly to himself again: "Amitabha [2], please bestow a million blessings on those people, do not let them give the game away. If Su Su finds out that they lied to him, and earned ten taels of silver in the process, not only will there be no benefit to them, but Su Su's feelings will also be hurt."

As he made his way to his old neighbourhood, Su Yi noticed that on the whole, the city had changed very little from the time he left for the border. When he saw that that was true even for the very street where he had lived, the familiar sight caused his nose to feel a little bit sensitive and he was in serious danger of shedding tears. He slowly came to the mansion that used to be his home, only then did he realise that after he left for his post, the Qi Emperor must have expropriated his residence and awarded it to someone else. A man, who he recognised as an official who had served the Qi Emperor, and his family were living in this house now, and even all his old servants were gone. These circumstances evoked sad feelings, and he was unwilling to stay longer. Instead, he came to the house of the childless old lady that he had helped to support, only to find that coincidentally, most of his old neighbours were gathered there to socialise and were engaging in relaxing idle chat. Among them were the pregnant lady and the mother of the girl who had been "threatened" that day.

Wanyan Xu felt a cold hand close over his heart at this most unfortunate and unexpected development --- who could have thought that Su Yi would find every single one of the principal actors in his play at one fell swoop? His face turned white, while beside him, Zi Nong's face turned green. When the people in the house saw them, they were stunned by the surprise at first, but soon remembered their manners and hurried to pay their respects.

Wanyan Xu's heart was pounding like a drum that was being repeatedly struck, just as he was about to say something to those people to hint that they should keep up the act, Su Yi, who had already taken a good look around the house, smiled gently and said: "Now that I see that you are all living well, I am relieved." As his words

faded, he saw the pregnant lady step forward. With a look of shame blanketing her face, she said: "Big Brother Su, about the matter of us conspiring with the Emperor to deceive you, I was the one who made that decision for everybody. Please do not blame anyone else, I am here, you can punish me as you see fit." With these words, she tried to kneel in front of Su Yi, but Su Yi caught her with one hand and prevented her from doing so.

As for Wanyan Xu, he had ascended the throne of Jin Liao during a tumultuous and troubled time and had experienced many different scenes. His attitude could be described as "I shall attain mastery of everything below Heaven and above the Earth." No one could have imagined that when he saw his web of lies being blown away so easily, he would feel like he was on the verge of collapsing himself. Luckily, Zi Nong had seen the danger and held him up, she thought to herself: This woman confessed immediately when she saw Young Master, she is very straightforward indeed but it might not be wise for her to assume responsibility. But since she has done this, Master would not suspect that Zi Liu and I had already exposed his secret, so this can be counted as a silver lining in the midst of misfortune. After these thoughts passed through her mind, she raised her head and saw that Su Yi was looking in their direction with eyes as clear as spring water.

Wanyan Xu looked at his sweetheart, but words failed him and he was unable to speak. He heard Su Yi ask him: "Wanyan Xu, Madam Lei said she helped you to deceive me, what is that all about?" Hurriedly, Wanyan Xu fought to recover a little bit of his shattered imperial dignity; after sneaking a resentful glare at Madam Lei, he plastered a smile on his face and said to Su Yi: "It's... It's nothing much, I just thought that if I really had really ended up cost any of them their lives, you would never have been able to forgive me for as long as you live. So I just thought... I only wanted to use them to scare you into submission. But I was afraid that they could not take the fright, if any of them really died of fear, this is not... that would still be counted as me killing them... that's why... that's why... that's why... the rest, Su Su you should know very clearly." When he finished speaking, he found that he did not dare to look at Su Yi any longer, and hung his head in guilt, expecting retribution from his beloved.

A long time passed but the angry snarls and loud abuse he was expecting did not materialise. As he was wondering why, he suddenly saw a long, slender yet strong hand reach out to clasp his own. When he raised his head and gazed in astonishment at Su Yi, to add to his surprise, Su Yi was wearing an expression that Wanyan had never seen on his face before --- it was soft and tender. With a gentle smile, Su Yi said: "You are the ruler of a nation, how can you look so disheartened? People will laugh when they see such a thing, you should put that expression away quickly."

Wanyan Xu was by nature a cunning and clever person, and he couldn't but to feel a bit suspicious at this moment. As he looked at his beloved's face, which was as serene as a pool of limpid autumn water, he questioned whether this was just the calm before a violent storm, and Su Yi was simply waiting for them to return to the palace before calling him to account. The more he mulled over the strange happenings of today, the more uneasy he felt. As he watched Su Yi begin to converse happily with those people, he began to worry that he would reveal himself to be the henpecked husband that he had become in front of all these common folk. With Zi Nong in tow, they quickly made their retreat from the house and the two put their heads together to think hard of a way to deal with the situation but even after pondering for a long time, they could come up with nothing.

Contrary to Wanyan Xu's expectation, after they had returned to the palace, Su Yi did not even care to bring up the matter again. Wanyan Xu was on edge and spent a few days walking on eggshells around Su Yi, but Su Yi seemed to have completely forgotten about the whole incident and his attitude towards Wanyan Xu even softened --- it was far from the intense resentment and hatred that he had shown him previously. Feeling secretly delighted in his heart, he thought: *Maybe after Su Yi found out about the truth, he feels less disgusted with me.* With that in mind, he could finally stop worrying and he showed even more favour and affection towards Su Yi. Sometimes, when he encountered some difficulties in his rule, he would discuss it with Su Yi and he came to find that his beloved really did live up to his reputation for being an expert in both civil and military matters. Unfortunately, he had been born at the wrong time in the wrong place, his talents had been thoroughly wasted by the fatuous Qi Emperor.

Su Yi's frame of mind was also undergoing a gradual change. The respect Wanyan Xu showed to Su Yi, the way he cherished and cared for Su Yi, all these demonstrated to Su Yi that Wanyan Xu was indeed in love with him, and his feelings were not merely an obsession born from a desire to conquer Su Yi. When Su Yi thought about it carefully, both as an Emperor and as a husband, this man was outstanding. The only thing he could fault Wanyan Xu for was that he had fallen in love with the wrong person. As a man, he should not have fallen in love with Su Yi, another man, but perhaps that choice was not something that he could be expected to control.

Every time he thought of this, Su Yi would find that his hatred towards Wanyan Xu had lessened by a little. Although the expression he wore on his face remained the same, the feelings in his heart had long begun to heat up, could it be... could it be that he could really forget about all the various humiliations he had suffered, could it be that he was really going to fall in love with the enemy that had destroyed his country? No, he could not accept, nor could he dare to believe that this would be his answer.

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They spent their days like this, time slipped by swiftly and without realising it, late summer was upon them. On this day, they had gone boating on the imperial lake, and Su Yi was admiring the lotus blossoms floating on the surface of the water while beside him, Wanyan Xu was reading a book. The Qi Palace had a huge collection of books, and because Wanyan Xu was fond of learning and self-improvement, he diligently studied them every day, and sometimes Su Yi even became his teacher.

The weather on that day was actually extremely hot, but the water of the pond was cool and a light breeze was stirring the air, making it incomparably comfortable to be on the boat. When Wanyan Xu had finished reading the scroll, he looked up and saw that Su Yi was beginning to doze off while leaning against the railing of the boat and he hurried to take Su Yi gently into his bosom. From admiring the lotus flowers, Su Yi

had become relaxed, in addition he had consumed a few cups of osmanthus wine and now, he was feeling sleepy. Although he could feel that someone was holding him, he just opened his eyes slightly, fidgeted a little bit, tucked his head down and then began to sleep soundly in Wanyan Xu's arms.

Wanyan Xu looked down at the man who was slumbering in his arms; the serene expression he wore in his sleep was vastly different to the one he wore when he was awake. He planted a light kiss on Su Yi's lip and sincerely felt in his heart that all he wished for was that Su Yi Su Yi would always sleep peacefully in his arms just like this for the rest of their lives and that Su Yi would share in the governance of this land, with its miles of lakes and hills, with him. If he could have these two things, he would wish for nothing else in his lifetime. He gave a contented sigh, and had Zi Nong bring over a cup of tea. Drinking it from her hands as he did not wish to relinquish his hold on Su Yi, he continued to read.

After an indeterminate length of time has passed, Su Yi began to awaken gradually. Opening his eyes, he was met with the sight of Wanyan Xu's handsome face just above his own. His eyes were fixed on the book he was reading, which rested on the table, while his strong-as-iron arms were gently encircling Su Yi, and were holding him in a position that was the most conducive for a comfortable sleep. Enthralled, he stared blankly at the sight before him. Waves of emotion rose in his heart, the silky threads of warm feeling could no longer be denied, strong enough to topple mountains and overturn seas, they spread to occupy every corner of his body.

Wanyan Xu's attention was still focused on his book, and he did not realise that Su Yi had awakened, until he happened to bow his head and saw that Su Yi was looking at him attentively with limpid eyes like clear water. He couldn't help but rejoice, gently propping Su Yi up, he said: "Are you still tired? Do you want to return to the palace for a rest? Although the weather is hot, and you are covered with this robe, you should still be careful or you might catch a cold."

Su Yi looked down, only then did he realise that without him knowing, Wanyan Xu had draped his own outer robe over Su Yi's body as a makeshift blanket. He quickly said: "No need, it is better to stay here; it will be too hot in the palace." So saying, he

took a piece of snack food from the dish Wanyan Xu offered to him, and ate it, accompanied by tea.

At the moment, Zi Yan, Zi Nong and Zi Liu were also on the boat, waiting on them. Zi Nong and Zi Liu gazed at the picture Wanyan Xu and Su Yi made, which could be considered harmonious and warm, and found that their hearts were gladdened. The exception was Zi Yan, who only cared to look at the sprawl of azure blue waters surrounding the boat. Suddenly a palace attendant came to report to Wanyan Xu, saying that various places in the Zhou province had been afflicted with plagues of locusts, and the local official there had dispatched emissaries to make a full report and they were waiting now in the Outer Court.

Wanyan Xu promptly stood up and said to Su Yi: "Accompany me and have a look?" Su Yi smiled and said: "You should go by yourself, as long as you keep the interests of the people in mind, I shall be grateful to you. Actually, I know that you will do that even without me saying."

Wanyan Xu left, taking Zi Liu with him. Su Yi looked at Zi Nong and Zi Yan and said abruptly: "Zi Nong, go back and fetch me the two boxes of snacks that were delivered this morning, I suddenly have a craving for that type of food, and nobody else knows where I left it." Zi Nong promptly agreed and left. After that, Su Yi looked at Zi Yan and said: "Miss, I've noticed that for a while now, you seem to have something to say to me whenever you happen to see me. Perhaps you hesitated because there were always other people around, but now that the two of us are alone, please don't refrain from speaking freely."

With a cold smile, Zi Yan said: "Do you really wish to hear it? If you don't listen, you can continue to enjoy glory, splendour, wealth and rank with nary a care in the world, as well as the exclusive favour of His Majesty. Should you choose to listen, I'm afraid that an impending disaster that could cost you your life would be right in front of you. General Su, you must think it over carefully, I will only give you one opportunity to make your choice."

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The expression on Su Yi's face remained stoic, and he said with a bland smile: "What joy is there in life, what horror is there in death. There is no harm in Miss saying what she thinks, Su Yi will just listen with respectful attention."

When Zi Yan heard his words, she gave a chilly smile and said: "Good, General Su has the qualities of a real man indeed." So saying, she approached Su Yi and whispered quietly in his ear: "General, actually, I don't have much to say but I wanted to tell you a piece of news. Some time ago, General Yu Cang received a secret report about a plot and arrested a few hundred scholars on the charges of attempted treason and conspiracy against the state. These people had wished to overthrow our regime and restore the Great Qi. At the moment, besides General Yu Cang and I, nobody else knows about this matter. I was just thinking that among the arrested people there might be some of General's old acquaintances, so I thought that I would tell you about this. Although it is true that General enjoys great favour, His Majesty is still not someone who does not know how to judge the severity of a situation and act accordingly. These treasonous rebels will undoubtedly be made to pay for their guilt, but if the investigation should be expanded, more people will be implicated. In that event, who knows how many more people we can apprehend who harbour the wish to defy the law in their hearts."

Before Zi Yan had finished with her speech, Su Yi's face had already assumed a different expression and he glared at her fiercely. However, Zi Yan did not flinch, rather, with a flat look at him, she gave a cold smile and said: "Naturally, General understands full well that with every change of dynasty, what the new Emperor treats as most taboo is rebellion. With regards to these people who wish to restore the previous dynasty, this incident would surely cause His Majesty disillusionment. He has always treated the people of Qi with leniency and kindness, to think that there are still Qi people who wish to restore that morally decayed regime."

Of course, Su Yi fully understood that these words were Zi Yan's way of threatening him, and he said emphatically: "Wanyan Xu is not that type of person. Even more importantly, you are only telling one side of the story, I cannot fully trust everything

you say. Miss Zi Yan, you only wish for my death; that is easily achieved. Why do you need to use threats on me, just like your master?"

Zi Yan gave a smile and then retreated, saying: "That was all that Zi Yan wished to say. If General does not believe Zi Yan's words, he can summon Young Master Xu and make inquiries of him. I hope that General will remember that the lives of all those people now lie in your hands. As for His Majesty's threats, Young Master should clearly understand by now that His Majesty would never have been able to harden his heart enough to actually harm those people but that is not the case for General Yu and me. Young Master should consider your decision carefully."

Su Yi was just about to question Zi Yan further, but he saw that Zi Nong was rushing back towards them. Because of Zi Yan's words, his heart was in a state of chaos, and his feelings were as tangled as a pile of hemp fibre. Mindlessly, he picked out snacks from the boxes Zi Nong had brought, but he could only eat a few pieces before he gave up.

The next day, at the first opportunity, Su Yi sent people to invite Xu Jinhua to the palace. They had just barely greeted each other, but Su Yi's heart had already begun to sink. This old friend had always been possessed of a distinguished and elegant appearance and manner in all the time Su Yi had known him, but at this moment his face was wan and the vessels in his eyes showed up like many red threads. When he saw Su Yi, with tears in his eyes, he said: "Ruo Zhi, I was just about to look for you too..." Before he could continue, tears began falling from his eyes like raindrops.

Su Yi half-collapsed onto the chair, and without needing any further confirmation, he knew that Zi Yan's words had been true. At his ear was his good friend, who was pleading with him, asking him to beg mercy from Wanyan Xu and have him spare the lives of those scholars and literary folk. But in Su Yi's heart, he clearly knew that Wanyan Xu would be indignant that even though he had conferred benefits to the common people of Qi again and again, there were still people who wished to overthrow his rule. With a rage born of humiliation, there was no way that he would be willing to just drop the matter. Even if he wanted to ask Wanyan Xu to spare them as a favour to Su Yi, he had no idea how he could put that idea into words. He could

only make promises to his friend, so that he could leave reassured.

With a couple of bitter laughs at himself, he could only think to himself that Heaven was really too cruel to him. Why were people always using the innocent lives of others to threaten him? Wanyan Xu had already gotten all that he desired using this method, and now, what did Zi Yan and Yu Cang hope to achieve by emulating him? If all they wanted from him was his life, he would gladly have given it to them, as long as they would guarantee the safety of the captured literati in exchange. He was just a prisoner of war who was dragging out his ignoble existence; there was really not much he had left to live for, nothing that he was reluctant to leave behind. The only question left was how Zi Yan intended to set about disposing of him.

Hence, Su Yi passed the next several days in a blur. Every day, he had to force himself to smile and be happy in front of Wanyan Xu, and through occasional surreptitious enquiries, he learned that Yu Cang had not reported the attempted rebellion of the literary folks. This knowledge offered him a little comfort. He thought, as he often did, of how in their lives together, Wanyan Xu had always been supremely considerate and tender to Su Yi, and of how touched he would feel when he leaned against the body of this man, who had, somewhere along the line, become a bulwark for Su Yi. And yet, Su Yi was going to leave him again, hurt him yet another time. Whenever he thought of this, the bitter pain he felt was beyond words and it would seem that sorrow and grief were drilling a hole right through his heart.

By this time, the little Crown Prince Wanyan Shuo had been utterly tamed by Su Yi and now diligently came over every day to give an honest report of his progress in his lessons. Whenever Zi Nong and the others saw that, they would all incessantly click their tongues in wonder at this development, thinking to themselves that Young Master didn't really do very much, so why did this clever and crafty Wanyan Shuo admit defeat so easily?

On this day, Wanyan Shuo had just departed after his daily visit to Su Yi, and Zi Nong was sitting in the side room with a few palace maids, chatting while they were doing embroidery. A late summer breeze was blowing in from the windows, bringing with it a thread of comfortable coolness.

Zi Nong raised her head suddenly and said with surprise: "Any of you notice that there is a hint of a strange sweet scent in the wind..." Before she could finish, her head grew heavy and her legs felt wobbly. She could not help but be extremely alarmed, immediately understanding that there was something not quite right about the situation. Just as she was going to stand up and call loudly for aid, a sheet of blackness descended before her eyes and she was unable to prevent herself from collapsing to the floor. Unlike Zi Nong, the palace maids were all unlearned in martial arts and had even less ability to resist the powerful effects of this bewitching scent. In an instant, all the people in the house had all collapsed without making a sound. Even Su Yi, who was in the inner chamber, was no exception.

Zi Yan cast a glance at the guards, who had all fainted, before entering the residence and giving another cursory look around the room at all the palace maids who were lying unconscious on the floor. Proceeding to the bedroom, she came to the bed where Su Yi was lying insensible and said in a low voice: "General Su, although you were captured, you managed to retain your integrity; Zi Yan deeply admires you for that. But I certainly cannot allow a person like you to remain the Empress of my country, Jin Liao. Although my actions today will harm you, they will also let you preserve your reputation as a man who was constant in his loyalty until death and you will be a martyr for your country. I think even after you have reached the underworld, you will not resent or hate me." So saying, she picked Su Yi up, and quietly left through the back entry. Using an out-of-the-way alley that was deserted, she came to the palace wall where a man was already waiting for them.

"The General has already completed all the necessary arrangements, and instructed this humble servant to relay this message to Miss as that you can be at ease." After that man finished speaking, he saw Zi Yan nod and he took Su Yi from her hands; bending down, he disappeared with Su Yi through a hole in the wall that had been obscured by shrubbery. Zi Yan stood unmoving at the spot for a while before rousing herself and made her way back to the Garden of Merriment in a headlong rush. She left a plain letter on the table that Su Yi usually used as his writing desk, after looking around again to check that there was nobody around, only then did she leave with hasty steps.

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Because Liu Province and other places had been severely impacted by natural disasters, Wanyan Xu had been preoccupied with discussing appropriate countermeasures with his ministers for the past few days and sending officials to the afflicted areas to distribute grain and other forms of disaster-relief. Therefore, he had no time for any respite during the daylight hours, only when night fell could he go to the Garden of Merriment and enjoy some tender moments with Su Yi.

For Wanyan Xu, the day was proceeding as normal and he was reading the memorial that the official he had dispatched to Liu Province had sent by courier which said that the basic arrangements were already in place to provide for the people, there were no cases of people starving to death, etcetera, etcetera and that the Emperor heart should rest easy. Suddenly, he saw Zi Nong come stumbling in on shaky legs, her face was as white as a ghost's, and she didn't pay respects to Wanyan Xu. "Hu Hu..." she panted out, but before proper words could form, two clear lines of tears were streaming down her face.

Wanyan Xu was greatly amazed, these four treasured servants had been with him for many years and all of them had developed the ability to remain calm under the most calamitous circumstances. To see Zi Nong reduced to this state, he knew immediately that something as important as Heaven must have happened. His very first thought was of Su Yi because right after their marriage, Wanyan Xu had assigned Zi Nong to be Su Yi's personal attendant, therefore she was with him for much of the day. Could it be that something had happened to him? When he thought of that possibility, he felt totally aghast. He hurriedly got up from his chair and went to hold up Zi Nong, in a grim voice, he said: "What has happened, you must not panic, slowly tell me [1] everything."

Tears were flowing from Zi Nong's eyes like rain, her sobs made it difficult for her to speak and she could only hand over to Wanyan Xu the piece of paper she had been clutching in her hand.

With unpleasant suspicions filling his heart, he took the paper and opened it to have a look and saw that a short poem was written on it. It read [2]:

A few beats of the night-watch drum, I am startled awake in the room, the candles have gone out, the dawn is cold. My dreams took me to Inner Mongolia, the sound of horses' hooves still ring in my ear. Autumn has come and the geese are travelling south. I can no longer find a path back to my home, but my feelings remain. My wings have been broken, but my spirit is untamed.

My life-long wish, I have spent my youth pursuing, not realising that my hair has grayed. The sentimental moon still shines upon that destroyed country. An old acquaintance is before my eyes, but upon inspection I see that there is no will left in his heart. Looking back at the road I have travelled, I see that although I my clothes have become soiled, the lands remain unchanged.

The handwriting on that note could not possibly be any more familiar to Wanyan Xu, the note had obviously been penned by none other than Su Yi. His heart felt like it had turned into a block of ice, this poem was obviously saying that he should pick up his spirits and regain his vigour, so that he could recover the rivers and lakes of his homeland and restore the Great Qi Empire but no matter how he thought about it, he couldn't imagine that Su Yi would do such a thing. When he looked at Zi Nong again, he saw that she had finally regained a bit of composure that she normally possessed. In a choked voice, she said: "Two hours ago, your humble servant, other palace maids as well as the imperial bodyguards in the Garden of Merriment were poisoned with a sedative drug carried through the air and without exception, we all fell unconscious. When we woke up, Young Master was nowhere to be found; only this document was left on the table. As for what we should do now, I urge Your Majesty to make your decision quickly."

Utterly devastated, Wanyan Xu buckled and collapsed onto a chair and the piece of paper slipped from his hands. The expression on his face seemed to be torn between crying and laughing, and he could only mumble: "Good Su Su... You... You must have had a hard time hiding your feelings from me... You have really proven

yourself to be a good minister of the Great Qi, and my good Empress... You... You..." He could only stay there and mutter to himself, while Zi Nong could only watch with increasing worry and nervousness. Just as she was at a total loss, she suddenly saw Zi Yan enter into the room. When Zi Yan saw the state the other two people were in, she hurried to put on a surprised demeanour and asked: "What happened?" When she saw that Wanyan Xu was not about to reply, she turned towards Zi Nong, who then finally retold the story of what had happened.

Zi Yan went forward and picked up the piece of paper, after giving it a quick perusal, the expression on her face changed and in a loud voice, she called out: "Come, attendants." Immediately, two little eunuchs stepped into the room, ready to receive orders. She calmly instructed them: "Summon General Yu Cang here for an audience with His Majesty."

The little eunuchs left to carry out her instructions, while Zi Nong said urgently: "Zi Yan, what are you doing? Why summon General Yu? The less people that know of the Empress Consort's disappearance the better, so why spread the news to other people. Besides, His Majesty has not given us his commands yet."

Zi Yan gave a cold laugh and said: "You have served His Majesty for so many years and should know better, but I see that you must have been befuddled by Su Yi as well, or else you would not have become so useless when faced with such a critical matter. That Su Yi obviously still harbours untoward intentions in his heart, he merely bided his time and used the days he spent with His Majesty to bewitch him, after lulling His Majesty into having a false sense of security he meticulously schemed with his accomplices to execute a plan of escape by coordinating offensives both inside and outside the palace. In the end he didn't even say anything to His Majesty in his parting letter. He only used this poem to express his feelings of desolation and humiliation after being captured and to declare his ambition of recovering the lands of the Great Qi. Why do you still expect such a heartless and unfeeling person to live up to your fantasies?"

So saying, she turned to Wanyan Xu and said: "Your humble servant once warned Your Majesty that setting up such a faithful and unchanging man as Empress is very

wrong. Nonetheless, Your Majesty could not be dissuaded and proceeded with your plans anyway because you were obsessed with him. Although the events of today proved that your humble servant had been right, Your Majesty does not send out people to hunt for him, but only sits here to grieve and agonize over him, these... how could these be the actions of Zi Yan's master, the maverick who dared to defy the whole world, the eminent ruler of Jin Liao, Great King Wanyan Xu who led his people to avenge the defeats we had previously suffered on the battlefield?"

"Zi Yan..." Zi Nong had anxiously shouted at her several times in warning, but how could such efforts deter her from speaking further?

They suddenly saw Wanyan Xu lift his head up slowly, after giving a bitter laugh, he said: "Good, that was well-said. You are really worthy of being the handmaiden of I, Wanyan Xu." So saying he took from Zi Yan's hands the poem that Su Yi had left, stroking the smooth paper fervently with both his hands and muttered: "Su Su, I have fallen in love with you whole-heartedly, I have treated you with sincerity, if I could gouge my heart out so that you could take a look for yourself, I would. Whether this land is called Jin Liao, or even if it is to be called Great Qi, it still belongs to the two of us, and it belongs to all the citizens of Jin Liao and Great Qi who live under Heaven. I had thought that you have finally understood this truth and had slowly managed to untangle the knot you carried in your heart, but how was I to know that in the end, I still misjudged you."

"Last time, you took advantage of my trust in you to attempt to die as a martyr for your country, this time you again took advantage of my trust to escape from the palace and try to restore the Great Qi. Don't tell me that you can face me calmly on the battlefield in a bitter fight to the end, will you be satisfied only when one of us is dead? Why do you have to ruthlessly trample on my devoted heart, crushing it to smithereens under your heel? When you treat me like this, do you not feel even a little bit of pain in your heart? Not even a little bit of pain?"

As Zi Nong listened to his words, she lost control of her feelings and had begun to sob early on. On the other hand, Zi Yan's face was devoid of all expression. Suddenly a voice was heard from outside, announcing: "General Yu Cang begs an

audience.” Wanyan Xu lightly touched the corners of his eyes with his fingertips before raising his head, the tumultuous waves of emotions having been banished from his face. After casting a glance at Zi Yan and Zi Nong, he said lowly: “Let him proceed in.”

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The sound of Yu Cang's steady footsteps gradually grew louder as he approached and Zi Nong's heart grew ever more conflicted. What should she do, His Majesty has summoned Yu Cang, evidently he intends to take some action, but it's just that Young Master... Young Master... In her heart of hearts, Zi Nong had no intention of accepting Su Yi's escape as fact.

“Your loyal subject Yu Cang kowtows and salutes the Emperor, may Your Majesty live ten-thousand years, ten-thousand years, ten-thousand ten-thousand years [1]!” As the sound of his voice faded, a tall, strong and vigorous figure knelt down in front of Wanyan Xu.

Wanyan Xu silently looked at this person, who could be counted among the most capable of his courtiers. He had once been a steadfast and unyielding captive too, but after he had surrendered, he had been loyal and devoted to Wanyan Xu. But as for Su Su, even until today, the two words "I surrender" had never passed his lips. Without exception, the only reason he had agreed to anything was because Wanyan Xu had employed force to get his way. Perhaps he should have expected that this would be the logical outcome of his actions, right from the beginning.

“Yu Cang, receive my [2] Imperial decree.” Wanyan Xu slowly seated himself and said: “I order you to coordinate your efforts with the High Minister of Justice, and immediately start searching both in the city and beyond the city for the escaped... Empress Su Yi. If you find him, you are to arrest him immediately but bear in mind that you are not to cause him any bodily injuries, I want you to bring him before me without a single hair harmed.”

When she heard these remarks, Zi Yan's heart began to sink. She did not expect that even when matters had come to this, the Emperor would still show such consideration towards Su Yi. He even referred to Su Yi as the Empress, obviously the notion of deposing Su Yi had never even crossed his mind. Zi Nong, on the other hand, felt slightly reassured. She stole a look at Wanyan Xu to assess his expression and the look in his eyes, but there was no trace of his thoughts or emotions. She thought to herself that although the Emperor was really enraged this time, but somehow he managed not to show any concern or hurt on his inscrutable face. Yu Cang pondered deeply over his strategy for a while, before saying hesitantly: "Your loyal subject will always carry out Your Majesty's directives to his fullest ability, but if that... that Empress chooses to resist arrest, when the fighting commences, with him being highly skilled in martial arts, your loyal subject does not dare to guarantee that he will not be totally unscathed. I fear that I might not be able to fulfil Your Majesty's wishes."

Wanyan Xu thought over the problem for a long time, he understood well the degree of Su Yi's proficiency in martial arts. Although he could not hope to match Wanyan Xu's prowess by a long shot, when compared to the man before him, Yu Cang, their levels of skill were pretty much identical. He nodded his head and said: "Just do your best. There is strength in numbers but they do not have to lay down their lives to comply with my wishes. Just keep in mind the result that I desire. But there is one condition you must fulfill. You will not bring his corpse back to see me, nor will I accept that any serious injury is inflicted upon him. Or else, in spite of whatever difficulties you might have experienced, you will have to suffer heavy punishment."

Yu Cang bent his head down and answered "yes". With a furtive look at Zi Yan, he thought: *If I have to suffer heavy punishment, then so be it. A heaven-sent opportunity like this comes only once, if I do not take advantage of it, I will not have another chance to get rid of him.* Although his heart set on this course, what he presented on the surface was deferential respect as he promised to obey Wanyan Xu's wishes.

Wanyan Xu waved his hand and said: "You can go, I shall wait for your news." After Yu Cang had taken his leave and left, Wanyan Xu slumped into the chair in profound

despair, unable to keep his hands from rubbing his temples repeatedly. Suddenly he heard an impatient shout coming from behind the door: "Imperial Father." He hurried to sit up straight, only to see that the little Crown Prince Wanyan Shuo had come dashing into the room. In his haste, the distance that should have been covered with three steps was spanned in two steps.

"Shuo Er..." Before he could finish speaking, Wanyan Shuo interrupted anxiously: "Imperial Father, I went to look for Mother Empress, but he wasn't there. The palace maids and eunuchs said that he had ran away, is that true Imperial Father, is that true?" His little face was hot and flushed, and tears were already pooled in his eyes but he prevented them from falling through sheer willpower.

Wanyan Xu looked at his son, and the pain in his heart grew even more acute. He thought: *Su Su oh Su Su, you are indeed artful, after you have won over this pair of father and son, as easily as you flick your sleeves you left in such a dashing and casual manner with nary a care for the relationships we have developed.* With his ears, he could hear that Wanyan Shuo's voice was growing more agitated as he said: "Imperial Father, I don't believe it, I don't believe that Mother Empress would run away. Earlier today, he even said that he would give me a test in three days to determine how I was doing in my school work, he won't say such a thing if he didn't mean to do it." After he finished speaking, he could no longer contain his tears, and they began to fall onto the floor, each drop producing a audible sound as it hit the green tiles.

Zi Yan's heart grew even more surprised. She knew that this little Crown Prince had always been insolent and considered everyone else to be beneath him, with the exception of his father. So why has he developed such a deep attachment to Su Yi? Hurriedly, she said to him in a low voice: "Crown Prince, what they said is correct, Empress Su Yi has indeed escaped. His Majesty has ordered General Yu to pursue and arrest him, I believe that he would be captured soon. A person like him, whose heart still belongs to the old Dynasty, is just the stubborn and unchanging surviving member of the evil former regime. There is really no need for the Crown Prince to shed tears for him."

Wanyan Shuo glared fiercely at Zi Yan and suddenly gave a loud outburst: "I don't believe it, I don't believe that my Mother Empress is that type of person." After that, he turned towards Wanyan Xu and said: "Imperial Father, how could you order Yu Cang to apprehend Mother Empress? His hatred for Mother Empress is as deep as the ocean, he will definitely take this opportunity to harm Mother Empress."

Zi Yan's shock was great when she heard these words, and her eyes darted to Wanyan Shuo. But she heard Wanyan Xu's voice say soothingly: "That won't happen, Imperial Father has already stipulated that General Yu is not to harm the Empress, he won't dare to disobey my instructions. You should return to your studies quickly, perhaps Su Su has been entrapped by someone, when he returns and wants to test you on your homework, what will you do then if you are not prepared?" So saying, he ordered Zi Nong: "Bring the Crown Prince back to his residence, also, go and tell those palace maids and eunuchs that they are not to spew nonsense, or else I won't let them off lightly."

Fear was creeping into Zi Yan's heart at a steady pace, she had never expected that even under such circumstances, Wanyan Xu would still retain faith in Su Yi. She thought that the situation was getting dangerous, but luckily, Yu Cang and her had made very careful arrangements, if they hadn't done so, perhaps not only would all their efforts have gone to waste, but they were likely to have brought upon a fatal disaster upon themselves.

Here, Zi Nong was leading Wanyan Shuo out by the hand. They had just reached the door when he suddenly wrenched himself free and said: "This won't do, I must follow Yu Cang and find Mother Empress." He ordered his personal guard Xiao Yan, who was the same age as himself: "Yan Yan, go with me, we need to hurry up and catch up with General Yu before he finds Mother Empress. Humph humph, if he thinks he can play tricks right under my eyes, he has another think coming." So saying, he didn't wait for Wanyan Xu to raise any objections and hurriedly sped off.

Zi Yan turned pale with fright at this development, and hurriedly said to Wanyan Xu: "Your Majesty, the Crown Prince is still young and is still not very sensible. It would not be good if he runs into any mishap. Even worse, if he should be taken hostage

by that Su Yi and used as a tool to threaten us, the consequences don't bear thinking about. Your humble servant will go and retrieve him right away."

Wanyan Xu waved his hand and said: "No need for that, let him do as he pleases, it's good for him to learn through experience, even if... even if Su Su has really defected, he also... he also needs to see it with his own eyes before he will believe it." So saying, he heaved a heavy sigh. Zi Yan could only stand there feeling increasingly frantic, but she also did not dare to give chase after the little Crown Prince in open defiance of Wanyan Xu's wishes.

War Prisoner Chapter 53

With a belly full of hopeful expectations and counting his chickens before they are hatched, Yu Cang set off to deal with his *bête noir* once and for all. But before he was even half-a-mile into his journey, he heard the thundering of horses' hooves behind him, when he turn back for a look, he saw that the Crown Prince Wanyan Shuo and his personal bodyguard Xiao Yan had caught up to him. Shocked and dismayed, he hurried to dismount from his horse to formally greet Wanyan Shuo, before saying: "The body of the Crown Prince is more valuable than ten-thousand taels of gold, I wonder what is the important matter that has caused you to come here personally?"

Wanyan Shuo gave a "humph" and said: "My heart is troubled over my Mother Empress and I want to go with you to chase after him. General Yu please rise, it is important that we find Mother Empress as soon as possible."

In his heart, Yu Cang thought: *If you are to go with me, won't my plan be ruined?* Therefore he hurried to raise his objections: "The Crown Prince must not do that. You must be mindful of your exalted status, it is not appropriate for you to take risks casually. If that treacherous subject should..."

Before he could finish that line, he was impatiently interrupted by Wanyan Xu who said: "Stop spouting nonsense. My Imperial Father has not even deposed the

Empress yet, but you dare to refer to him as a treacherous subject. You are guilty of the crime of showing great disrespect, aren't you afraid of the consequences? If you defer to my wishes today, I shall not pursue this further. But if not, then be prepared for me to lodge a complaint against you in front of my Imperial Father, and you can be sure that I will embellish the tale to present you in the worst possible light. As you well know, I'm not a very reasonable person." With that said, he gave a sinister laugh, and spurring his horse on, he passed by Yu Cang.

Of course, Yu Cang knew full well just how formidable this little demon king could be and he did not dare to obstruct him any further. He could only suffer in silence as he proceeded to "search" for Su Yi in Wanyan Shuo's company. His heart was filled with hate, but he could only grind his teeth helplessly. It would seem like his scheme was going to fail, all because of a hiccup when it was time for the final push. The only silver lining he could see was that if he executed his plans well, when the time came, it would be Wanyan Xu who would be demanding that Su Yi be put to death.

Speaking of Su Yi, he did not know how much time had passed after he had been knocked senseless by the airborne drug before he began to gradually stir himself and regain consciousness. His eyes registered that he was in a large hall and a group of people were peering at him intently. He could not tell who they were affiliated with, since they were all dressed differently. When they saw that he was awake, their eyes filled with ridicule and one of them said in a malicious voice: "Empress Consort, my humble self was ordered by General Yu to make a request of the Empress Consort on his behalf. He requests that the Empress Consort put on a performance with us. General Yu said that for the sake of the lives of your compatriots, the Empress Consort will definitely be willing to comply with this request."

Su Yi gave a protracted sigh, understanding in his heart that Zi Yan and Yu Cang had finally launched their operation to remove him. In his heart he thought: could it be possible that this was the fated course of his life? In becoming the Empress of Jin Liao, he had earned the rebuke of the intelligentsia that were loyal to the Great Qi. Now he had been entrapped, and he was going to be forced to say that he had betrayed Wanyan Xu. The common people of Great Qi, who supported Wanyan Xu's

rule by large, would undoubtedly also rebuke him for this. Was it that from the moment he was taken captive, he had been doomed to this fate, the fate of becoming an object of scorn and derision of everybody under Heaven?

But at the moment, he only said blandly: "I already know what type of role you want me to play in your performance. Su Yi is just one person; my life is not even worth mentioning as long as it means that my countrymen will remain unharmed. Rest assured, I will wait for General Yu to come here and kill me."

The people in the hall exchanged a few surprised glances and the man who had originally spoken said: "Good, General Su lives up to his reputation indeed." So saying, he turned to his accomplices and said: "Since General Su has already agreed, you should hurry off and make the necessary preparations. The person who was assigned to make the report to General Yu should lead him here soon." Before his words had faded, they heard raucous voices ringing out from the street.

At that moment, in the street corner Wanyan Shuo was looking coldly at the "house servant" that had approached them with a report. In a strident voice he said: "This is the place? After Mother Empress escaped, he met up with your master to plot in secret about how to bring about a rebellion to overthrow Jin Liao, all that took place in this mansion? Are you sure you are not lying?"

The "house servant" who had ran out to them in the middle of their search said: "That's right. Your humble servant does not dare to tell lies, it was here. My master keeps a close eye on all his servants, it was with difficulty that I managed to bribe the doorman to let me out, I had to lie that I needed to return home urgently because my old mother has taken ill. But from what the Crown Prince said, you suspect your humble servant? No matter how much courage your humble servant has, he will not dare to lie to the Crown Prince and General Yu."

Wanyan Shuo gave a cold laugh and said: "I think Mother Empress is really inside this house, but your appearance is really too much of a coincidence. General Yu and I had only just started to search for Mother Empress's whereabouts when you showed up. Even if you truly wished to make a report, how would you know where

we would be? It looks more like somebody had arranged for you to be there in advance.”

That "house servant" and Yu Cang both felt a jolt of fright in their hearts, but that fellow was also possessed of a cunning nature, after he heard Wanyan Shuo's words he quickly said laughingly: “How would your humble servant know where General Yu and Your Royal Highness the Crown Prince would be? But that is the road leading to the Shun Tian Prefect Office. Your humble servant usually would not even dare to approach the General's door, much less the Imperial Palace. So I had intended to make my way to the Shun Tian Prefect Office to make a report to the high official in charge of the county. But as it happened, I saw Your Highness and General Yu, so I came forward to make my report to you.”

Wanyan Shuo nodded and said: “That being so, could General Yu please knock on the door.”

Yu Cang hurriedly replied: “Yes.” And then he ordered his men to break down the door to force their entry. Wanyan Shuo said furiously: “I only asked you to knock on the door, what is all this commotion for? What shall we do if Mother Empress is frightened? How dare you defy my instructions?”

Yu Cang hurried to bend his body in a bow to Wanyan Shuo and said: “This insignificant general would never dare. But there is one thing we have to keep in mind when dealing with these traitors. That is, they are all exceptionally sly. If they hear a knock on the door and see so many uniformed troops outside, they would certainly know that their plot has been uncovered. At that point, they would certainly scatter and flee. The Empress is accomplished in martial arts, if he has the opportunity to escape, we wouldn't know where to find him.”

Wanyan Shuo gave a peeved “humph” but he had to concede that there was logic in Yu Cang's words. Unable to nitpick further, he walked in with a sullen look on his face, only to be confronted with the sight of several men engaging the uniformed Jin Liao troops in a fierce battle. Among them was a man dressed in white, his robes fluttered in the wind and his entire appearance was as attractive as jade. Although

he was engaged in a fight to the death with his enemies, every single stroke and every move he made was imbued with grace and beauty. When Wanyan Shuo's attention was drawn to him, his heart was shaken to its core and without meaning to, he blurted out: "Mother Empress... You... You... You..." His heart overcome by excruciating pain, he could not continue to speak.

Su Yi gave a long exhale, and turned back to look. However, the guard that was by his side whispered to him: "The consort should fight more seriously, if the Crown Prince sees that something is wrong, don't imagine that even a single one of your compatriots would be able to preserve their lives." His heart quaked, and he recovered his concentration. Although suffering boundless anguish in his heart, he had no choice but to act as though he was trying his utmost to break out of his encirclement.

Wanyan Shuo looked on blankly, all the while feeling that his heart was sinking slowly but inexorably, as if it was sinking into an abyss that was so deep that the eye could not see where it ended, until his whole body felt devoid of all warmth. He almost didn't even have the strength to sit up, luckily Xiao Yan noticed the state he was in and quickly stepped forward to support him.

War Prisoner Chapter 54

In the end, Yu Cang had the strength of numbers on his side, and in much less than an hour, all of the "rebels", with the exception of Su Yi, had all been "killed on the spot." Su Yi, on the other hand, had had his acupoint struck and had fallen into a slumber and was being carried back to the palace. In fact, all of this had been pre-arranged. The so-called "killings" had been faked by using concealed bladed weapons to slash open bags of pig blood that the people who were acting as rebels wore in front of their chests under their clothes. After that, they merely had to play dead.

So, it has to be said that the person called Yu Cang was indeed very smart. He knew that the only tool he had that could be used to blackmail Su Yi were the lives of the

few hundred scholars that he had captured, who were the actual rebels in this whole scenario. If he had used them in his play and Wanyan Xu had insisted on investigating the matter and decided to hold them accountable, Su Yi would surely feel that Yu Cang could not be trusted. If he then decided to go renege on their agreement, the consequences would be disastrous. But if he were to use his own subordinates as pawns and have them act out the part of the "rebels", if they lost their lives as a result, the rest of his subordinates would undoubtedly be disillusioned with his leadership. In future, not one of them would be willing to give himself wholeheartedly to Yu Cang's service. Therefore, he came up with the stratagem of "killed on the spot" to explain why there were no captives and resolve his dilemma. But he never thought that the little Crown Prince would make a sudden appearance when he was on his way to the mansion and in his heart, he was deeply worried that the little Crown Prince would be able to see through the faked deaths. However, Wanyan Shuo had become so shocked when confronted with the proof of Su Yi's treason that he was nothing but an empty shell of himself at the moment. There was no hint of the cleverness that was such an integral part of his personality normally, so there was no possibility that he could have seen through this staged play.

Yu Cang secretly rejoiced in his heart, thinking: *Not only will this Crown Prince not present any obstacle to me, but he has instead become my best witness, it seems that even Heaven is helping me today.* When his gaze drifted over the face of Su Yi, who was still knocked out cold, a vicious and smug expression flashed over his own mien. He thought: *I'll like to see how you can escape death this time! Humph humph, even if you don't die, you can't turn your fortunes around. You were asking for it. As a man, and a general at that, you shouldn't have a woman's tender-heartedness but you chose to be as mawkish and tentative as a grandmother instead. In polite terms it could be called kindness, but to put it not-so-nicely, it is called having a death wish. Everything that happens today is of your own making; you have no room to blame others.*

Because Su Yi was now a fugitive with the dual identity of being the Empress as well, Yu Cang did not dare to cause any delay. Together with Wanyan Shuo, he proceeded to the palace at once to report on the completion of his mission.

Inside, Wanyan Xu and Zi Nong had been growing more anxious as they waited, as they noticed that the sky was beginning to grow brighter in the east, the inner court attendant announced in a loud singsong voice: "General Yu Cang begs an audience." In surprise, he sprang from his chair and exchanged a glance with Zi Nong. Both of them were similarly apprehensive and wore their misgivings on their faces. After a moment, he slowly sat down again and said in a low voice: "Let him proceed in." In his heart, the troubled feelings still circulated incessantly.

After a short while, Yu Cang and Wanyan Shuo were ushered into the room. When Zi Nong saw that the face of the little Crown Prince was ghastly pale and his face was listless, as if he had lost his soul and dropped his spirit, she felt a cold hand closing over her heart. Her body felt weak suddenly, and she staggered back a few steps to lean against a pillar. Then she heard Wanyan Shuo say mechanically, as if he was nothing more than a wooden puppet: "Imperial Father, your son and subject went with General Yu to capture the fugitive Su Yi on your Imperial orders. Fortune was on our side and we were able to fulfil our task [1]. The fugitive put up strong resistance to evade capture, and as for his crimes... crimes... he confessed to them without expressing remorse..." His voice had just faded when he could no longer suppress his feelings --- after all, he was still a little child --- and streams of tears fell from his eyes. He turned away and said: "I'm tired, I shall leave for my palace first. Imperial Father, you... slowly investigate... don't push yourself... bear in mind... it is important that you take care of your health."

Upon hearing this type of words from his son, how could Wanyan Xu not understand the facts of the situation? Zi Yan, Zi Nong and Yu Cang all sneaked inquisitive glances at Wanyan Xu, by the candlelight, they saw that his face was placid and free of the billows of any emotion, as if he really did not place importance on love and personal matters. What they did not know was that under the Dragon Table, his fists had been clenched so tightly that the knuckles had turned white and his nails, although they were kept short, had pierced the skin of his palms, drawing blood, enough to soak his entire hand.

A long time passed before Wanyan Xu recovered enough of his composure to speak. Forcing himself to speak calmly, he said: "It must have been difficult for

General Yu. Where is the Empress now?"

Yu Cang said: "Your subject was afraid that the Empress would continue to struggle, it would not be good if he had harmed others or himself in the process. Therefore I struck his acupoint so that he would fall into a slumber. Does Your Majesty wish to bring him before the court for a trial now? Your subject will go and bring him here right away."

Wanyan Xu made no reply, and soon, Su Yi was escorted by two Imperial bodyguards into the room. Illuminated by the flickering candlelight, that face, originally so delicate and pretty, took on a more haggard cast. He looked at Wanyan Xu in his Dragon Throne, his exalted status so different from his own, and saw that his eyes were glued to Su Yi. But when he saw that Wanyan Xu's gaze had become empty and hollow, his heart couldn't help but to contract in pain. Hanging his head, he said: "Wanyan Xu, You... You... just kill me." Actually he need not have said those words, he knew that all he could hope for now was a speedy death. If he could use his own death to ease the pain that he had caused Wanyan Xu, he would be more than willing to make that exchange, even if he had to suffer "Death by a Thousand Cuts" [2]. After all... it now appears that through Su Yi's actions, he had caused Wanyan Xu to be heartbroken and disappointed yet again.

Wanyan Xu kept on looking at Su Yi fixatedly, but when Su Yi had hung his head, his face had become been veiled by a layer of silky black hair, and thus Wanyan Xu could no longer make out any expression on Su Yi's face. He stared on at Su Yi, as though he failed to recognize him, or perhaps like he had never even known Su Yi. Zi Yan and Yu Cang watched all this play out with increasing trepidation, just when their hearts were thumping with anxiety, Wanyan Xu suddenly opened his mouth to speak: "Su Su, lift your head up, this... is not like you."

Su Yi raised his head, and looked straight into Wanyan Xu's eyes. The emptiness he had originally seen was now gone, instead, his eyes were full of emotions as tender as flowing water as well as immeasurable helpless suffering. Su Yi felt his eyes grow hot, and he quickly let his head droop down again. His heart felt like it was being mercilessly pounded by a sledgehammer, again and again. In this moment, he would

have given almost anything to be able to immediately tell Wanyan Xu that he had been forced, that in fact he... had stopped wanting to escape long ago.

“To the victor goes the spoils; he who wins becomes king while he who loses becomes a bandit. Since my plans have failed, Su Yi can only ask for a quick death.” He was afraid that his sins were so atrocious that he could not be redeemed even through death, but besides giving Wanyan Xu his insignificant life, he really could not think of how he could begin to compensate this man, who had shown every form of tenderness to Su Yi to the fullest extent.

Wanyan Xu gave a bitter laugh and said: “Su Su, sure enough, you are still the same as before, still wishing whole-heartedly for death.” So saying, he took a look out the window and said: “It will soon be morning. I think you should be tired after the events of the previous day and this night, you should go and have a nice hot bath and rest for a while. General Yu, you can go and have a break too.”

Yu Cang and Zi Yan both looked up at him, stunned. Yu Cang looked at Wanyan Xu as if he did not dare to believe his ears, and opened his mouth to raise his objections, but in the end, he did not dare to do so and swallowed them down. Wanyan Xu looked at him, giving a mirthless laugh, he said: “Do not worry, although I admit that I am a man of passion, but I will certainly not flout the law because of my feelings. Tomorrow when court is in session, I will put Su Yi on trial, so as to... so as to give the court a proper account of this matter. For now, it is still not yet dawn, I just want to give to Su Su... a final moment of tenderness.” When he said these words, he felt like his heart was being sliced by knives. Standing to the side, tears were flowing like rain from Zi Nong's eyes and she could not keep herself from sobbing aloud.

War Prisoner Chapter 55

The place of the scene was once again the large pool in the Garden of Merriment. Through the clouds of steam rising up from the pool, the silhouette of two people entwined in an embrace while being seated was vaguely visible.

“Su Su, do you still remember the very first confrontation we had in the water?” It was Wanyan Xu’s gentle voice that was speaking. Su Yi leaned quietly against Wanyan Xu’s body, while wrapped in his arms. With his eyes shut, he made no reply but suddenly, he said: “Wanyan Xu, just kill me, you... really don’t have to treat me like this anymore.” His heart throbbed with pain, as intensely as it did when he first heard that the Great Qi had been destroyed. The difference was that, this time, his heart was aching for the very man who had destroyed the Great Qi.

Wanyan Xu ignored Su Yi’s reply and continued to scoop water in his hands to pour over Su Yi’s body, again and again. While gently rubbing Su Yi’s body, he continued on the same line of questioning, as if that was the only thing that occupied his thoughts, saying: “You were so impressive in that moment, even though you already understood that you were not my [1] match, you still continued to struggle desperately, just like an implacable wild beast that would continue fighting to the death, even after sustaining a serious wound. Obviously you had already been tortured to your limit, is that not so? Su Su, if you had known then that the indomitable spirit you showed me on that day would lead to everything that followed after, would you have tried to be a little more amenable at that time?”

Su Yi gave a sigh, but otherwise remained silent. Although it would seem as though Wanyan Xu also did not really wish for him to reply, as he continued to speak: “But I [2] too, was really formidable at that time, in my heart, I didn’t have any notion that I should be tender or protective towards my paramour at all.” He gently stroked Su Yi’s long hair, which was floating on the surface of the water and suddenly gave a soft smile and said: “Su Su, at that time I... I must have caused you much pain, right?”

“Wanyan Xu... I beg of you... beg you please don’t be like this...” Su Yi could no longer keep the tone of his voice even, and his words came out choked with emotion. Feeling weak, he leaned his entire body into Wanyan Xu’s embrace. Why was it that only now, when this embrace was on the cusp of being lost to him forever, that he realized it was actually so warm and comforting?

Wanyan Xu could only remain silent and clasp the person he loved to his bosom

even more tightly. His face was wet, but whether it was from tears or condensation, one could not say. After a long time had passed, he said in a husky voice: "Su Su, you tell me, are you being framed by someone? You tell me, I will support you. You are my Su Su, I will definitely, definitely back you up." The force with which he embraced Su Yi grew greater and greater, clear evidence of the increasing anxiety in his heart as he waited for Su Yi's reply. This was his... his very last thread of hope.

Su Yi's heart began to feel an unprecedented conflict; this new development was surprising even to himself. Just as Wanyan Xu had often said, he really was a soft-hearted person, no matter what the occasion might be, the fate of his fellow citizens would always be the best bargaining chip for someone to use when trying to blackmail Su Yi. As long as they had this leverage in hand, even if the result would be the eternal damnation of his soul, he would not have hesitated for even a moment before complying with their demands. However, when he was lying in this man's embrace, feeling the deep love he bore for Su Yi, he actually began to hesitate. His fervent desire to not let this man suffer yet another hurt because of Su Yi was actually strong enough to compete with Yu Cang and Zi Yan's threat to end the lives of his compatriots.

Without meaning to, Su Yi's silence gave Wanyan Xu a reason to let his hopes rise. He gently tilted Su Yi's chin up, so that their gazes met straight-on. Wanyan Xu carefully tried to capture and make sense of all the emotions that were swirling in Su Yi's pupils, hoping to find the answer he desperately craved. After a long time, Su Yi suddenly shut his eyes and articulating each word clearly, he said: "No, no one has framed me. Wanyan Xu, you should know by now that the wrongs you inflicted upon my country has become my personal vendetta to avenge. This laceration in my heart is like the canal that separated the warring states of Chu and Han. With the passage of time, the chasm will only grow wider bit by bit. It will never disappear." Ah! In the end, he still could not turn a blind eye to the fate of the few hundred compatriots who had been captured. He could only laugh bitterly in his heart as he thought: *Wanyan Xu, let us count this as me being in debt to you. If there is such a thing as reincarnation, then in our next lifetime, let me make it up to you slowly, bit by little bit. I don't care even if we are both of the same sex, or even if we are again born to be mortal enemies, I... will be sure to... slowly repay every single bit of affection you*

have given me.

“Su Su, why do you need to close your eyes? Don’t tell me that you will not be able to say such heartless things if you look at me?” As Wanyan Xu released Su Yi from his arms in disappointment, he could hear the sound of his own heart breaking.

“Wanyan Xu, I want to ask one last thing of you, take it as... take it as the last time you pamper me.” Su Yi opened his eyes, desperate entreaty showing over his whole face. He saw that Wanyan Xu had become withdrawn and abstruse, his eyes no longer betraying even a hint of any emotion. Shocked, his heart stopped for a few beats but in the end, he still forced himself to continue: “I beg of you, please do not vent the hatred you bear for me on the people of the Great Qi, you can... you can sentence me to death by a thousand cuts to assuage your anger. Do what you wish with me, but I only beg that you let them off. I am the only person guilty of treason; it has nothing to do with them. They... They are innocent ah!”

Wanyan Xu stood up slowly, haha, it was time to wake up from that impossible dream. In the end, all his Su Su cared for in his heart was still the people of the Great Qi. As for himself, the deep love he bore for his Su Su only met with his cruel betrayal in exchange. As if he had lost his soul, he walked towards the large marble bench, each step mechanical and stiff. He felt so much hatred in his heart; hatred so intense that he felt that even if he used the most brutal methods to punish the man in front of him, that devil that had been born in his heart would never be exorcised. So... so it would seem that it was actually such a simple thing for hate to be born from love. In total despair, he slumped onto the bench. In the mirror [3], he could see that a shadowy figure was approaching him from the back. Su Yi’s body was as white as snow and his long silky black hair was draped over his chest and back, imparting an enchanting allure to him that was as bewitching as that possessed by any fox-spirit [4].

“If you really do not wish for me to vent all my hatred on the bodies of your people, then you have to continue living, so that you will be here to withstand all the hatred I have on their behalf.” He stood up and said coldly to the palace maid who was standing by his side: “The morning has come, help him to dress in... garb that is

suitable for his status as a criminal. The last tenderness that I show to him has now come to an end." When he finished his speech, he did not look at Su Yi any longer. Heavy step by heavy step, he walked out of the bathroom.

War Prisoner Chapter 56

Courtesy of Yu Cang's loose and malicious tongue, news of the Empress's defection had spread like wildfire in the reception room where all the courtiers gathered before attending court in the morning. The crafty Yu Cang had his own plans for Su Yi; taking advantage of the fact that Wanyan Xu had neglected to explicitly order him to keep this matter a secret, he had made sure that every courtier gathered in that room now knew what Su Yi had done, stirring up animosity towards him and laying the groundwork for what Yu Cang wished to happen. That way, even if Wanyan Xu was still inclined to show favouritism towards Su Yi, all of the ministers would vehemently raise objections and prevent that from happening.

For the moment, the room was noisy with discourse, it would seem as though everybody had something to say. When the ministers remembered how the Emperor had shown this Empress so much favour and love, without exception, they could not help but to feel fury and loathing towards that ungrateful Empress. Curses and recriminations were flying, condemning Su Yi for being ungrateful and saying that he must not get off lightly. There were even some ministers who asked the High Official in charge of the Ministry of Justice to prepare all the implements necessary for carrying out "Death by a Thousand Cuts", so vehement was their antagonism towards Su Yi.

Suddenly a high voice was heard saying: "Court will commence." Only then did the ministers quiet down and begin to proceed into the large hall in single file and in accordance to their rank with the highest ranking officials in front. When they saw that Wanyan Xu's eyes were swollen and bloodshot, they couldn't help but to feel sad on behalf of the Emperor, and their hatred for Su Yi grew more intense.

After the simple memorials pertaining to the daily business of running the empire had been presented and dealt with, he saw that none of the ministers had any more

memorial scrolls in hand to submit to him. Instead they were looking at him expectantly. Without exception, their eyes were blazing with fury. He heaved a heavy sigh, knowing that these courtiers must have already discovered what Su Yi had done. Having no recourse, he had to ask: "The Empress Su Yi's heart is still loyal to his destroyed country. Yesterday, he defected and escaped from the palace. Credit must be given to the Honourable Minister Yu, due to his tireless efforts in searching everywhere for the Empress, he was captured by the light of the stars last night. As for how he should be punished, let's see what the High Official in charge of the Ministry of Justice has to say." [1]

He Jian stepped forward and in a grave voice he said: "The Empress is the Mother of the Nation; as such he should have assisted and supported the Emperor by taking the lead in the running of the Inner Court and also setting an example for everybody under Heaven. But not only did he spurn His Majesty's kindness, he secretly formed a coterie with treasonous villains. Taking advantage of the Emperor's favour and trust, he absconded. His actions show that his heart is even more ruthless than that of wild beasts. After committing such a heinous crime against Heaven's Son, he deserves the punishment of lingchi [2]; he should be sentenced to be executed through Death by a Thousand Cuts.

Wanyan Xu could only laugh bitterly for a while, truth be told, he had already anticipated what kind of answer He Jian would give him. Even worse, he knew that by the laws of the land, he could not refuse to mete out such a punishment to Su Yi. His heart was heavy as he thought: *Wanyan Xu, oh Wanyan Xu, even at this stage you cannot bear to part with him. Whenever you think of his death, all you wish to do is to follow him into the Yellow Springs of Hades so that he will not have to make the journey alone, you... you are in no way the same Great King of Jin Liao that you used to be.* He was still determined to save Su Yi's life, but he had always ruled the country with impartiality and in accordance with the established laws. If he, as the monarch, were to take the lead in flouting the law today, in future how could he maintain the moral high ground when leading his officials or commanding the common people?

Several important officials immediately saw that the Emperor still could not

contemplate executing the Empress, and quickly stepped out from the lines to fall upon their knees. One after another, they implored Wanyan Xu to sentence Su Yi to death. When Wanyan Xu saw that the outrage of his court was of such violent intensity, he instinctively knew that this time, he really could not preserve Su Yi's life. However, although he opened his mouth a few times, he was still unable to say the two words "bestow death" [3]. Before he could speak those words, tears were welling up in his eyes, threatening to spill over. He lowered his head and hurriedly pretended to cough behind his sleeves, but in actual fact, he was wiping his eyes dry.

Divided over what to do with Su Yi, the Emperor and his ministers were deadlocked. At this juncture, they saw that the little Crown Prince Wanyan Shuo had entered into the palace hall. Without preamble, he knelt stiffly on the floor and said: "Imperial Father, your Son and Subject knows that Mother Empress has committed a heinous act, the crime he is guilty of is so serious that it really cannot be pardoned. But on account of the effective guidance he has given to me, I hope that Imperial Father will spare his life and sentence him to live out the rest of his life in hardship instead. Your Son and Subject begs Imperial Father for this favour." So saying, he knocked his forehead on the ground three times.

The gathered ministers all looked at Wanyan Shuo in amazement. Their previous experience with His Royal Highness the Crown Prince had all pointed to him being eccentric and antisocial, so they could not understand how he had developed such a deep attachment to Su Yi. A gleam of gratification and pride shone in Wanyan Xu's eyes and he could take some comfort; Shuo Er was growing up, gradually becoming more sensible. The clever child had come to the aid of his besieged father, giving him a way out.

Wanyan Xu surveyed the congregation of courtiers with a glance before slowly opening his mouth to say: "Shuo Er is still a young child, and his mother had died early. Also, he has not received even the slightest bit of warmth and affection from any of the other concubines, only the Empress has taken upon himself the task of overseeing his education in addition to showing him care and concern. It would be pointless for me [4] to execute the Empress today, he welcomes death anyway. Instead it will inevitably cast a shadow over the rest of the Crown Prince's life.

Besides, my hatred in my heart can hardly be assuaged by simply executing him. Instead, I shall sentence him to sixty strokes of flogging with a rod and after that, he will be demoted to become a slave in the palace, so that he will have to endure the pain of humiliation every day and every night for the rest of his life. This way, the law pertaining to the punishment of traitors is not circumvented, and my hatred can also be vented through his continual suffering but at the same time, the rest of the Crown Prince's life will not be marred. This course of action has threefold benefits, what do all the honoured officials here think of it?"

All the officials looked at each other doubtfully. They were all equally aware that even at this stage, Wanyan Xu was still biased towards Su Yi but even if they were to protest, the Emperor's mind was clearly made up. Before they could do anything, they saw that Wanyan Shuo had quickly knelt down again, and then he said in a loud voice: "Imperial Father is enlightened." With that, the gathered officials were obliged to give the Crown Prince some face, and following his lead, they reiterated: "The Emperor is enlightened, this course of action is extremely good."

Yu Cang could only grind his teeth in frustration, although he had no recourse but to accept Wanyan Xu's decision. With a roll of his eyes, a new idea suddenly came to his mind. Taking advantage of the fact that everybody was occupied with discussing the new developments and was paying him no mind, he slipped towards the palace guard who had come into the hall to receive instructions on how to mete out Su Yi's punishment. Quietly, Yu Cang said to him: "Later, hit him with all your strength, and hit only his legs." How would the common palace guard ever dare to offend Yu Cang, an important general? Moreover, Wanyan Xu had not stipulated where or how Su Yi was to be hit, therefore the guard cheerfully accepted Yu Cang's order and left.

Wanyan Xu and his son watched as Su Yi, attired in a white prison uniform, was brought into the large hall. After that, two people went up to remove his shackles, fixing a rope around him, they pulled him out. As all of this transpired, the hearts of both father and son felt like they were being sliced with sharp knives but they could do nothing more for Su Yi now. Saving him from death's maw had already been no easy task. Wanyan Xu had already been presumptive when he had acted on his own initiative and decreed that Su Yi would have to suffer sixty strokes of the rod but if he

had not done so, if the sentence had been set by the Minister of Justice, he was afraid that even one hundred strokes would have been deemed too little. Even if Su Yi's body was strong and healthy, he would still have suffered permanent disability at that point. For the lack of better options, Wanyan Xu's decree was the best Su Yi could hope for under the circumstances.

Leave aside how, at this moment, the two hearts of the father and son were feeling terribly upset and confused. Going back to the gathered officials, they were still buzzing with conversation and discussion. Suddenly, the distinctive "pa pa" sound of wood striking against flesh was heard from the courtyard. Wanyan Xu's chest constricted and he folded his hands together, tightly, as if his life depended on it. On the corners of Yu Cang's mouth floated the hint of a sinister smile, but it was too subtle to be easily detected. As for the little Crown Prince Wanyan Shuo, he had come to the end of his endurance, bowing his head, he could no longer contain his tears and they streamed down his face freely.

Beyond the palace doors, "pa pa" sounds were still coming from the courtyard, causing Wanyan Xu to feel excruciating pain, as if someone was trying to dig out his soul from his body. Over and over again, he thought: *Su Su, why don't you cry out? Maybe if you let yourself cry out, the pain might be more bearable, Su Su, why don't you scream in pain? You... you should shout out!*

Each blow of the rod descended on Su Yi's body, but each and every one of them also delivered a hard knock at Wanyan Xu's heart. His expression remained stoic. Only the paleness of his complexion, and the minute trembling of his lips, which he couldn't control, try as he might, gave any clue to his state of mind. As his heart was being tormented, he suddenly saw Wanyan Shuo stand up so abruptly that his chair made a harsh noise as it scraped the floor. In a loud voice, he said: "Something's not right..." Before his sentence was complete, his person had already dashed through the door.

Wanyan Xu's heart felt like it was being squeezed tightly, as he hurriedly descended from dais where the Dragon Throne was set up, he heard Wanyan Shuo's furious voice ringing out from beyond the palace hall: "Who... Who allowed you people to beat him using this method?" Hearing that, Wanyan Xu was both alarmed and afraid, and he hurried outside. The assembled ministers also promptly followed him out. Once in the courtyard, Wanyan XU saw that Wanyan Shuo was standing next to the long bench that Su Yi had been tied to for the course of his punishment and, in a loud voice, was questioning the two palace guards that were carrying out the punishment. The white prison attire that Su Yi, who was still bound to the bench, was wearing had become soaked through with perspiration and clearly showed that in the area of his knees, the bleeding flesh had become badly mangled. Wanyan Xu's head spun, and he almost blacked out. Forcing himself to remain conscious, he flung himself in front of Su Yi to take a look at his face, only to see that although blood was dripping from his lips, he had already fainted.

"Su... Su Su..." In his heartache, he could only mutter incoherently to himself while tenderly stroking that face, which was covered with cold sweat. He suddenly heard Wanyan Shuo sob: "Imperial Father... Imperial Father don't let them hit him anymore, one of Mother Empress's legs... has been... has been... they have... they have already broken one of his legs."

These words came like a bolt from the blue, causing Wanyan Xu to snap his head up suddenly to stare at his son. Almost stupefied, he could only say: "You... what did you say?"

Wanyan Shuo rubbed away his tears roughly, pointing a finger accusingly at the two palace guards he said with hate: "It's all because of these two and their skulduggery. I listened for such a long time in the palace hall before I felt that there was something off... When I rushed out to take a look, I saw that it was because these two scoundrels had concentrated all their blows on Mother Empress's knees. That's why the sound of the rod impacting flesh was not muffled as it should be but instead it rang out loudly with 'pa pa' sounds. I took a close look just now, that's how I discovered that one of Mother Empress's legs... has already been... has already been..."

Wanyan Xu was rooted to the spot, standing stock-still he stared at Su Yi's mutilated legs, unable to tear his eyes away. He found the emotions swirling in his heart to be inexplicable and strange. On one hand, he felt like his heart was being mercilessly sliced with a blade, again and again. On the other hand, there was a startling but undeniable rush of satisfaction rising from the bottom of his heart. In his mind, there was a voice that kept repeating these words in a loop: His leg is broken, his leg is broken, now that it's broken he can never run away anymore, can't run away anymore...."

"Imperial Father." In his anxiety, Wanyan Shuo was shaking his own Imperial Father, thinking that he had become overwhelmed by grief. However, as he looked on, he saw that after his father gave him a glance he turned his head to look at the assorted ministers. After a long time passed, Wanyan Xu asked through clenched teeth: "How many more strokes?"

One of the palace guards stood forward and answered: "Reporting to Your Majesty, twenty strokes are yet to be administered."

Wanyan Xu clenched his fists. Steeling his heart, he said: "Continue to carry out the punishment, but you are not to strike at his legs anymore." With that said, he did not spare another glance for Su Yi who was still unconscious on the bench and briskly strode back to the hall.

Wanyan Shuo stared with utter disbelief at the retreating backs of his Imperial Father and the accompanying ministers as they disappeared back into the hall. When the sound of the rod striking Su Yi rang again in his ear, he felt his nose twitching as he began to tear up again. Suddenly, he rushed over and draped his own body across Su Yi's back and said loudly: "I will bear the remaining twenty strokes on his behalf, you can hit me instead."

Stumped, the two guards ceased their movements and stared at each other, neither of them daring to strike Wanyan Shuo. Wanyan Shuo put on the unreasonable demeanour he usually wore, and said to the eunuchs and palace maids who had

come forward to try to pry him off Su Yi: "If any of you dare to touch me, you'll have to live with the consequences. I'll make sure of it!" His threat scared those people so much that they did not dare to make a move. At this impasse, he heard a long sigh and somebody said: "Your Highness the Crown Prince, please get up, don't make things any more difficult for His Majesty." When he raised his head to investigate, he found that Zi Yan and Zi Nong were standing by his back, and those words had actually come from Zi Yan's mouth.

Wanyan Shuo looked at them cautiously, on the alert in case either of them tried to forcibly remove him. When they saw that he was still refusing to leave Su Yi, Zi Yan said: "Do you really think that the Emperor is allowing this because he is heartless and is repudiating the relationship they had in the past? That's a misconception. Su Yi's has committed a most heinous crime, by sparing his life, His Majesty is already guilty of showing favouritism. The only reason why none of the ministers raised strong objections was because none of them wanted to appear to be disloyal if they had caused the Emperor to lose face with their opposition. Now, if they see the Emperor showing favouritism even over the much more lenient sentence of flogging, it will be as plain as day to them that the Emperor is still deeply devoted to Su Yi and that he does not have even the slightest determination to punish him. How could the ministers ever countenance that a traitor who deserted the Emperor and fled to plot a rebellion should live on and continue to bewitch the Emperor's sacred judgement? In that event, even if the Emperor desires to preserve his life, I'm afraid that he might not succeed in keeping him safe. If Your Highness the Crown Prince really wishes to save him, then please leave for the moment and let the palace guards complete the remaining twenty strokes."

Wanyan Shuo slowly released his grip on Su Yi and Zi Nong rushed forward to sweep him up in her arms. In a choked voice she said: "Your humble servant will accompany Your Highness back to his palace." So saying, she left with him but they kept looking back towards Su Yi as they left. Here, the palace guards took up their rods again, after they had carried out the full sentence, they went into the palace hall to report that the deed was done.

Wanyan Xu then asked indifferently: "Zi Yan, has a room in the servant quarters

been made ready for the Empress?" Zi Yan replied that it was indeed ready. Wanyan Xu then sighed and said: "Command a few people to carry him over there, and send for an Imperial Physician to see to him and give him some medicine. Wait until... wait until his injuries have healed before putting him to work." With that said, he looked at the assembled court and said: "Any other business?"

He Jian stepped out from the row of ministers again, after bowing he said: "Answering to Your Majesty, Su Yi did not appreciate your sacred kindness, the crime he has committed --- to deceive the Emperor --- is truly most heinous. But Your Majesty has been benevolent and granted him more leniency than the law allows for. Now that he has been reduced to a slave, your loyal minister feels that Your Majesty should draft an Imperial decree and have it proclaimed all throughout the land that Su Yi has been stripped of his position as the Empress. Your loyal subject hopes that Your Majesty will grant this request." Once he had completed his speech, the rest of the ministers echoed his sentiments unanimously.

War Prisoner Chapter 58

Wanyan Xu deliberated for a long time but finally, he nodded and said ruefully: "The honoured minister He is right, I [1] will issue a decree to announce this matter today. Court is dismissed." So saying, he lugubriously rose up from the Dragon Throne and without further ado, went back to his own palace.

Zi Yan followed behind him, looking at his dejected figure, she could hardly recognize him as the Great King of Jin Liao who had always been so high-spirited and full of mettle. From her memory, her master had not been this miserable even when the late Great King had died. The fact of the matter was, she was still unflinchingly loyal to Wanyan Xu. She couldn't even describe what emotions it produced in her heart to see him reduced to this state.

Silently, in her heart, she thought: *Oh Your Majesty, Zi Yan is not a totally heartless person. Hidden in that document left on the table, there is actually an important piece of evidence that would exonerate General Su of all the charges laid against him. If*

your love for him had been just a bit shallower, your judgement would not have been thrown into chaos because of your concern. With your towering intellect, you would undoubtedly have found the incontrovertible evidence of his innocence by now. But now that your infatuation with him has progressed to this extent, once you heard that he had committed treason, you immediately seem to have lost your soul. That left Zi Yan with no choice but to go along with General Yu's plot to get rid of him. Your humble servant has wronged General Su, but I have not wronged Your Majesty nor have I wronged the state of Jin Liao and its lands.

The master and his servant made the journey back to his residence in silence, when they arrived, they saw that Wanyan Shuo was inside, and he was still grieving terribly. Zi Nong and the Empress Dowager were also present, and were trying to console him with gentle words. When Wanyan Xu saw the Empress Dowager, he hurriedly forced a smile onto his face and said: "On this day of Great Heat [2], why has my Mother Empress come here? If you have something to say to me, you should have summoned me to your residence to save yourself the discomfort of travelling in this heat."

The Empress Dowager sighed and said: "I [3] heard that there was some trouble concerning the Empress. Alas, he is a General of the Great Qi after all, how could he be willing to throw in his lot with us? If he has been deposed, then so be it. But I heard that Shuo Er is still distressed, so I came to take a look. This is also very surprising, this child has always been eccentric and arrogant, does that Su Yi have demonic powers? How has he managed to bewitch the two of you to this extent?"

Wanyan Xu did not say a word, instead it was Wanyan Shuo who replied, between sobs, he bawled out: "Imperial Grandma, you don't understand. Shuo Er has been without his own mother since he was little and Imperial Father then entrusted Shuo Er to the care and guidance of his Imperial Concubines. But all they wanted was to either use your grandson to solicit more attention and favour from Imperial Father or they wanted your grandson to help them become the Empress. Because they are seeking my favour, they invariably let me run amok and do as I please, even when I tease or play pranks on them. They were either too afraid of Imperial Father's displeasure or they feared that your grandson would avenge himself upon them after

he ascends to the throne in future. Therefore none of them were willing to tell your grandson off when he did something wrong, or to tell him what he should do. But the more they acted like this, not daring to defy your grandson in the slightest, the more I knew that they were not treating me with sincerity and that they only wished to make use of me. But Mother Empress was different, he genuinely wanted the best for your grandson. He never hesitated to reprimand your grandson when he did something wrong nor did he refrain from telling me what I should do and taught me the principle of conducting oneself with integrity like a proper gentleman. If my birth mother were still alive, she would surely guide your grandson in the same fashion. But... but now he has... actually defected and committed treason... Imperial Grandma, why did he do all those things? If he already knew that this day would come, he should not have treated your grandson so well. Imperial Grandma..."

Intermittently crying while speaking, Wanyan Shuo's emotional outburst moved everyone who heard it to tears themselves. Even Zi Yan's heart was feeling sorrowful. Wanyan Xu tilted his head back, trying with all his might to keep his tears from falling, and repeated: "That's right, if Su Su had long been prepared for such a day to come, why did he still share so many warm moments with this pair of father and son? Su Su, you... you have really hurt my heart too badly."

Against expectations, the Empress Dowager gave a heartfelt "humph" before saying: "My Imperial Son, how is your behaviour befitting someone who is the Emperor of Jin Liao? I did not see you being this heartbroken even when your Royal Father died. Today, all that you've lost is merely a treasonous Empress, what is so regrettable about that? Why are you drowning in self-pity? Shuo Er is still a child, it is inevitable that he would be unable to control his feelings. You on the other hand... Not only do you not try to teach him not to be troubled over such a person and such a matter, you are even standing there languishing over it yourself. Are you still your Royal Father's son? So sensitive and maudlin, just like a woman. And what of the country and our Empire, where have you placed them in your heart? Have you buried them at the very back of your mind?"

Her stern admonishment caused Wanyan Xu to break out in a thick layer of cold sweat, hurriedly he held his hands in a gesture of respect [4], saying sincerely:

“Mother Empress is right to lecture me. It has come as a wake-up call, your son will remember with reverence Mother Empress's teachings. I will make the country and our Empire my highest priority, and I won't wallow in my feelings for the traitorous general to the point where I lose control and be unable to extricate myself.” So saying, he looked at Wanyan Shuo and said: “You must have heard your Imperial Grandma's words, so why are you still here? You should be attending to your lessons now.”

Feeling very aggrieved, Wanyan Shuo reluctantly left the Emperor Dowager's comforting arms and promised that he would go to his lessons now. But when he reached the door, suddenly he again heard the Empress Dowager's voice, saying in all earnestness: “From now on, both of you must exercise even more wisdom in your governance, if this setback leads to a total collapse of our Empire, then wouldn't that Su Yi have succeeded in obtaining his heart's desire? The people of Great Qi would have even more cause to scorn us.” With that, she turned to address Wanyan Xu specifically: “It is also a good thing for you to let him keep his life. Let him see that even though the Emperor is from Jin Liao, he is still able to govern the lands of Great Qi well. My son, you must not give this rebellious villain the opportunity to look down upon you.” Wanyan Xu held his hands in a gesture of respect and said: “Your son will take to heart the Mother Empress's teachings.” Only then did the Empress Dowager rise from her seat and say: “All right, with the unexpected trouble keeping you up all night, you must be tired. I shall return to my palace, you should take a rest.” So saying, she left and her retinue of palace maids and eunuchs followed in her wake.

But with all that had happened, how could Wanyan Xu hope to fall asleep? With Su Yi's face was floating in his mind's eye while the memory of the Empress Dowager's words was ringing in his ears; they battled each other for supremacy, causing him to feel both pain and guilt. He spent the whole day and night thus conflicted.

Numerous days flew by in a blur again, and Su Yi's injuries had almost totally healed. Only his broken leg had failed to recover and in the end, he had become permanently lame. On this day, Gui Lin, the official in charge of the administration of the Inner Court, on hearing that Su Yi had more or less recovered, had arrived to

bring him to the laundry room to begin his servitude. But unfortunately, a situation of enemies meeting on a narrow road occurred, just as they reached the lotus islet on the way to the laundry room, Wanyan Xu and his son were approaching from the opposite direction. They were accompanying the Empress Dowager on a walk around the Imperial Gardens to admire the autumn scenery and a crowd of attendants were surrounding them. Gui Lin hurriedly tugged at Su Yi, they retreated to the side, and they bowed to show their respect.

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Wanyan Xu and the Empress Dowager were pointing out particularly impressive specimens of lotus flowers in the pond to each other and joking light-heartedly at the same time when Su Yi blundered into them. Both of them were stunned upon the chance encounter, but soon after, the surprise gave way to a wave of sorrow that surged up from the bottom of their hearts. They could only stare dumbly at each other for a spell, as all the attendants bowed their heads and averted their eyes at the awkwardness of the situation, not even daring to breathe too loudly. A heavy pall of silence descended, though the garden was a large venue, if a pin had dropped anywhere the sound it would produce would have been audible. The Empress Dowager just watched them with cold eyes, but she did not speak.

After an indeterminate amount of time passed, Wanyan Xu managed to force himself to recover his senses. "Hai..." he sighed and turned to speak to the Empress Dowager: "Mother Empress, it's not very interesting to just keep looking at the lotus flowers, how about we go boating on the lake? There are gentle waves today, it will be quite fun." Having said that, without sparing Su Yi even a single glance more, he bade Zi Nong to go to Madam Jia and instruct her to ready the boat. Wanyan Xu was wearing a smile on his face, and his steps were steady and even. He presented a convincing image that he had not been affected in the slightest by Su Yi, and only he knew just how deeply he had been shaken --- in his heart was a singular taste of bitterness that could not be adequately described with words.

Su Yi could only look on helplessly as Wanyan Xu brushed past Su Yi with an air of forced gaiety. He felt like his chest was being crushed under a large boulder, but at

the same time he also felt like it had been stuffed full of cotton, so that his whole body felt like it had been suffocated and there was no room for even a breath of air. He struggled desperately to maintain control over himself, if he did not, he was afraid that he would throw all caution to the wind and fling himself into the embrace of that man and tell him about all the injustice he had had to suffer.

Su Yi was still frozen to the spot, still struggling with his internal turmoil, but Gui Lin had grown impatient. Tugging at Su Yi's sleeve, in a tone that suggested that he was both mystified and cynical, he said: "What's up? Why are you still looking there? Aren't you supposed to be hard and unyielding? Didn't you disdain being the Empress of our Jin Liao Empire? Why do you look at our Emperor in such a soulful and caring fashion now? Are you hoping that the Emperor will fall under your spell again, so that you can trick him another time? Ha ha, how you do underestimate our Emperor. There are many handsome men and beautiful women in the world who will be only too willing to take your place by his side, do you really think that only you, Su Yi, will do for him?" So saying, he ill-temperedly grabbed Su Yi and dragged him along.

Since one of Su Yi's legs was now lame, he already had difficulty walking. With that tug from Gui Lin, he immediately stumbled for a few steps. Only then did he recover the ability to think coherently, thinking in his heart: *that's right, what am I looking at him for? That person... does not belong to me anymore... he stopped belonging to me long ago, at the very moment I chose to save the lives of those literati. Su Yi oh Su Yi, it was your own decision to sacrifice him, all the longing and nostalgia you feel now, is just a form of punishment and mockery that you deserve.*

The two contingents proceeded on their separate ways, and gradually drew further and further apart. What nobody noticed was that among the crowd, Wanyan Shuo kept looking back over his shoulder at Su Yi. But since the Empress Dowager --- Wanyan Shuo knew that she was not sympathetic towards Su Yi at all --- was present, and also because he was afraid of causing his Imperial Father more distress, he had forced himself to put on a façade of indifference in front of Su Yi. Later, as his party began to leave for the boat-house, he began to lag behind, taking advantage of the times when nobody was paying attention to him to look back at Su

Yi. When he saw that Su Yi and Gui Lin were also beginning to leave, he could bear it no longer and gave an alarmed cry of "AH!", which he promptly tried to stifle by clamping his hand over his mouth. In his large eyes, two large watery beads began to form, but he stubbornly refused to let them fall.

However, his exclamation had been heard by the Empress Dowager and Wanyan Xu, who turned back to investigate. Wanyan Shuo looked at his Imperial Father tearfully, but he refused to say anything. After a long time, he pointed to Su Yi's retreating figure, which would soon disappear completely from view, with a trembling finger.

Wanyan Xu was highly skilled in martial arts, and naturally, his eyesight was also vastly superior to that of ordinary people. The Empress Dowager looked at Su Yi, and did not find anything to be amiss, but Wanyan Xu immediately discerned that there was something off about Su Yi's gait. One step would be long, and the next one would be short, like he was dragging one of his legs along. A moment's thought, and his heart immediately understood the cause. At once, the heartache at the realisation became too hard to bear, and he reeled, almost blacking out. When she saw that his body was swaying, Zi Yan hurried forward to prop him up. She had already made up her mind to eliminate Su Yi long ago. This man was the enemy that had felled her brother in battle; therefore her determination to kill him has never wavered. But for some reason, this time, when she witnessed the grief of her master and saw Su Yi's lonely and desolate figure bent under all the grievances that had been inflicted upon him, she began to feel pain pricking her heart. Granted, the feeling was faint, but it was also unprecedented for her to feel any compassion for Su Yi at all.

Wanyan Xu managed to steady his mind and slowly straightened out his body. Looking at Zi Yan, he said warmly: "I [1] am alright now, let us go, Zi Nong should have gotten the boat ready by now." At his words, the crowd of attendants quickly gathered around them as they continued on their way to the "Pavilion for the Appreciation of Waves".

When Wanyan Shuo's playmate and bodyguard Xiao Yan saw that the Empress

Dowager and Wanyan Xu were already leaving but his little master was still staring blankly after Su Yi, he hurriedly tugged at him and pitching his voice low, he said: "Crown Prince, let's go."

Wanyan Shuo followed his little bodyguard's lead for a few steps, but then he abruptly halted his steps and twisting his body, turned and ran in the opposite direction. In his alarm, Xiao Yan gave a shout, causing the Empress Dowager and Wanyan Xu to look back inquisitively. The Empress Dowager was the first to heave a sigh and as if thinking aloud, she murmured: "Aii, this child..." After that, she looked towards her son, to see what he would say. Instead, Wanyan Xu just stood by impassively for a while before turning back and walking towards the pavilion as he said: "Let's just let him be."

Not turning back for a single look as he ran, Wanyan Shuo stopped only when he had reached Su Yi's side, by that time he was already panting hard for breath. When he heard footsteps approaching from his back, Su Yi had turned his head back for a look. When he saw that it was none other than Wanyan Shuo, he could not help but to stop dead in his tracks. Gui Lin also turned back, when he saw that it was the Crown Prince, in his panic he tripped over his own feet and stamped his foot in anger. He said: "Aiyo, you little devil, how come you ran over here without anyone accompanying you? This is a criminal, it is not appropriate for your sacred body, more precious than ten-thousand taels of gold, to be close to him." So saying he quickly tried to grab Wanyan Shuo.

Wanyan Shuo shook his fist threateningly, and glared at Gui Lin ferociously. Frightened into submission, Guilin cowered and did not dare to make another sound. Wanyan Shuo came to stand in front of Su Yi, after raising his head to meet Su Yi's eyes for a moment, he suddenly crouched down and began to roll up Su Yi's pant leg. In a strangled voice he said: "How could... how could this have happened? Won't... won't this heal with further treatment?"

When Su Yi saw that Wanyan Shuo brimming with genuine distress, his own heart couldn't help but to give a corresponding burst of agitation. He bent over and pulled Wanyan Shuo up, forcing a smile, he said: "How is this important? It is not worth

crying over, have you forgotten that you have to be mindful of your own status? How could you let your tears fall so easily over such a trivial matter?" His words stirred up many emotions within Wanyan Shuo, with a "whoosh" he stood up, and looked straight at Su Yi. His eyes flashed with complicated emotions, they could have been love, could have been hate, could have been pain, could have been respect, or perhaps even a mixture of all of them, it was hard to tell.

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Su Yi was startled by the look in his eyes and just as he was about to advise Wanyan Shuo to return to his father, he found that the boy was now staring at him obstinately. In a loud voice, Wanyan Shuo said: "Why? Why did you leave my Imperial Father and me? If you already intended to do so from the very beginning, then why were you so dedicated to teaching me right from wrong? Why are you now telling me to be mindful of my own status and that I should not let my tears fall so easily? I... that I have become like this today, does it have anything to do with you anymore? You... you stopped caring about me the day that you deserted us, isn't that right? Since you already knew that you would eventually abandon me, why did you ever bother to treat me well? The weaker I become, the more degenerate I am, the more convenient it will be for your hopes of restoring the Empire of the Great Qi, isn't it? You... you... I hate you." The little Crown Prince's words rushed out like a torrent, and by the time he finished his outburst, his little face was covered with tears. Suddenly, he brusquely turned his back to Su Yi and said in a loud voice: "I... I will never be put under your spell again and I will not listen to you anymore." As he said those words, he was already running up the path, away from Su Yi.

Su Yi's heart was wracked with agony. In the beginning, this Wanyan Shuo had aroused both anger and hatred in Su Yi but to his surprise, as he interacted more with him, he found had himself growing to love this child. His intelligence and sharp-wits, which had been so aggravating to Su Yi previously, had secretly become a source of delight and amusement instead. But he absolutely did not expect that this little Crown Prince, who had always been so idiosyncratic and arrogant, would also develop such a strong attachment to Su Yi in return. Su Yi had quite plainly forced

him to apply himself to his lessons, keeping his nose to the grindstone firmly. While the average child may have even resented the painstaking efforts he took to educate them, it turns out that this imperious Crown Prince was the rare child who could appreciate his good intentions. For a time, he reminisced about the time they had spent together with longing. But when the question that Wanyan Shuo had asked “since you already knew that you would eventually abandon me, why did you ever bother to treat me well” began to ricochet in his mind, he felt his soul breaking and his spirit become dejected, the boundless pain was beyond description.

Gui Lin pulled at him again and just as he was about to drag Su Yi off, suddenly Wanyan Shuo's voice wafted over to them from afar, carried by the autumn wind: “Gui Lin, if you dare to ill-treat him, see how I shall deal with you.” Gui Lin trembled uncontrollably at the threat, and muttered to himself: “This is really strange. He is obviously just a traitor, but somehow the Crown Prince deems him worthy of protection.” Still uncomprehending, he was tugging Su Yi along the path as he was speaking.

A few days rushed by again. On this day, it was already dusk when Su Yi had finished washing the huge load of laundry he had been assigned. His waist felt like it was going to break, his back was aching and he was totally knackered. From childhood, he had grown up in the household of a minister [1], and as a young man in his early twenties, he had entered government service as an official himself. After that, he had been elevated to the rank of a general. Although he had endured hardship in his years at the border, they had been of a different variety, namely harsh weather --- wind as cutting as knives and frosts as sharp as swords --- and the horrors of bloody battles. He had never been made to do hard labour nor had he had to suffer such misery or humiliation. Besides, almost everybody in the palace including the servants, harboured deep hatred towards him for betraying their Emperor and took every opportunity to humiliate him as a form of vengeance. Fortunately, he had a magnanimous nature and could tolerate the rough treatment.

He saw that it was already dusk and the red glow from the west was fading rapidly. He was the only person left in the laundry room, the rest having left for dinner. Seeing that the last piece of laundry had already dried, he sat down and waited in

the silence for someone to come and take over his duties. After a long time, two servant girls came back to the laundry room, with disdainful laughs, they said: "Alright, you can go." Su Yi knew very well that they had deliberately delayed before coming back to relieve him but he did not wish to pursue the matter. As he hobbled out, the sound of the girls' laughter followed him.

With much difficulty, he finally got back to the house. The servants who were in charge of distributing food had long gone, leaving the better part of a whole wotou [2] and the dregs of a bowl of soup for him. He ate them silently. Actually, although he was a slave, he could also have his meals together with the other slaves and the food served to slaves was not normally this meagre or of such poor quality. Just that everybody in the palace now hated him, when they saw that Wanyan Xu did not enquire after Su Yi's living conditions, they took the opportunity to maltreat him. And yet, how was Wanyan Xu to know about these things?

After he had finished the paltry meal, the moon was already shining brightly in the sky. Su Yi felt disassociated with his body; somehow it felt like his body no longer belonged to him. Dragging his feet with difficulty, he managed to shuffle over to the bed. Just as he was about to lay himself down, he suddenly heard the sound of familiar footsteps coming from beyond the window. He gave a long sigh, thinking to himself: why would you bother to come? Hurriedly, he laid his body out on the bed, and pretended to be asleep.

From the sound of the footsteps, he could tell that the person had already entered his room but he did not open his eyes. He felt someone sit down by his side and soon after he could feel light caresses on his face. A voice, so familiar and longed-for that Su Yi was in danger of being reduced to tears, gently said: "Aii, you have gotten much thinner."

Although Su Yi had always known that he could not say that his heart was as hard as iron, but neither did he ever think of himself as being melancholy or overly emotional. But to his surprise, just listening to Wanyan Xu say these words very nearly brought him to the point of breaking down and crying uncontrollably. He hurriedly squeezed his eyes shut more tightly and forced the tears back, but at this

minute action, the familiar touch on his face slowed. Wanyan Xu also promptly gave a sigh and said: "Su Su, so you are actually still awake."

Knowing that he could pretend to be asleep no longer, Su Yi decided that he might as well get up. With a cold look on his face, he said: "Why has the Emperor come here? Don't tell me that you are still reluctant to part with Su Yi? This is indeed laughable. You and I are irreconcilable enemies who cannot live under the same sky, how would I ever have been willing to be your Empress? I find it hard to believe that you would still feel sorrow over my desertion even till this day. You should have expected that this would be the result from the start. If you don't let me die, then I will flee. If you don't let me flee, even then, I will not countenance being the person who shares a bed and pillows with you. Wanyan Xu, I am now suffering punishment, but as a General of the Great Qi, that is the best proof that I preferred death over disloyalty to my country. I'm very happy with this outcome. So why should you obstinately refuse to come to your senses? Ha ha, just look at yourself now, why are you are still concerned over whether I have become thin or not? Are you really the same Wanyan Xu I've heard of, he who is known to be wise, astute and unfeeling? How come you are more mawkish than a woman now?"

The more Su Yi said, the more pain Wanyan Xu felt. He looked at Su Yi and said: "Su Su, you're right. Your attempts to die, your attempts to flee, are all the actions that would be expected of a blindly loyal courtier. From start to finish, nothing you have done is wrong. The person who is wrong is me [3]... is me." As he spoke, he rose to his feet. More and more, he felt that he had been asking for humiliation by coming here tonight. Just as he was about to leave with a wounded heart, he heard Su Yi raise his voice and say loudly: "Wait, Wanyan Xu, you once promised me that as long as I continue to live, you would not vent your anger on the populace of the Great Qi. You... You would not go back on your word would you?" By the time he finished speaking these words, Wanyan Xu was standing frozen in his spot, as still as a statue. He slowly turned to face Su Yi again, in his eyes Su Yi could see fathomless hatred and hurt.

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To see Wanyan Xu like that shocked Su Yi. Suddenly, Wanyan Xu rushed over to Su Yi, grabbing him hard with his large hands. His eyes were totally bloodshot as he said vehemently, with fury etched into each distinct word that he uttered: "You only have eyes for your people, no matter the occasion, they are all you are concerned about. What about me [1]? Have you ever considered my feelings at all? Even if only a little bit, even if it was only for the same amount of time as it would take for you to snap your fingers, have you ever spared a thought for how much heartache you have put me through? Your people are perfectly fine, but I am about to die from the pain, do you know that? Sometimes, I really wish that I could die immediately, it's fine even if it means that I will be called incompetent, even if they call me weak it would be worth it. To die just like that would be better than having to endure this kind of pain. But I can't die; the people, Shuo Er, Mother Empress and... and you... no matter who it is, I have to live on for your sakes. You can rest assured that I won't take action against your people because I want you to continue living. I want you to live on with misery, humiliation and heartache as your companions. If I hurt a minute, then you shall hurt for ten. Su Yi, since you already hate me, then I'll let you hate me to the utmost."

Su Yi looked at him mutely; his shoulders were being clutched by Wanyan Xu with almost crushing force, as if he wished to transmit all the hatred he felt to Su Yi's body through his pair of hands. His shoulder blade felt a fiery pain as if it had been shattered, but when compared to the anguish Su Yi felt in his heart, that physical pain faded into insignificance.

For a spell, the two stood there in silence, face to face, looking into each other's eyes but unfortunately both of them were circumspect, refusing to let any hint of their true feelings show in their eyes. At length, Wanyan Xu suddenly released Su Yi. He was reeling and stumbling as he backed away from Su Yi, when he reached the door, he gave a couple of acrid laughs and muttered, as if speaking to himself: "That's right, hate... only hate... is the feeling that ought to exist between the both of us." With that said, he turned his back to Su Yi and walked away with determined steps.

“Wanyan Xu, I’m sorry.” Even after the incapacitating agony in his heart had passed, he found that this was the only thing he could say. Su Yi closed his eyes, and resigned himself to another night troubled with dark and harrowing dreams.

"Ah Crown Prince, we had better go back. The weather is so cold yet you are unwilling to put on a cloak. If you should catch a cold, your subject cannot answer for it." At the rockery by the edge of the Imperial Lake, Xiao Yan was trying to advise his master. With the solemn look he wore on his face, he seemed to be like a little adult.

Xiao Yan was both alarmed and vexed, and could only keep stamping his foot in an impotent rage. Much aggrieved, he said: "Crown Prince, you are getting more and more unreasonable, if Su Yi were still the Empress, would you still dare to behave like this?" Only after the words had left his lips did he realise that he had spoken unwisely and slapped his hand over his mouth. But it was too late, Wanyan Shuo's

face had darkened ominously and he said: "Xiao Yan, don't you think that you should cut off your tongue? How many times must I say this, you are not allowed to bring up that person in front of me. Humph, I will go and make a report to my Imperial Father now. He'll dismiss you for sure, in addition to punishing you for this crime." So saying, he really stood up and walked off.

Xiao Yan was both scared and disgruntled at the treatment he had received. By nature, he was guileless and not very good with words. Not knowing how to inveigle himself back into Wanyan Shuo's good graces, he could only stammer as he followed behind him. With horror, he saw that in two more turns of the path, they would reach the Emperor's study. At that very moment, they suddenly heard loud, un-muffled shouts of abuse being carried to them by the wind.

Wanyan Shuo was stunned for a moment, which of the denizens in this palace could be so rude as to scold their servant so loudly while still outside? Even if they had wanted to teach their servant a lesson, they should have restrained themselves until they were inside their residence. He was cold-hearted by nature, apart from Su Yi, he did not care about the life or death of anybody else in the palace. But this time, his curiosity was piqued, and made his mind up to go and investigate who was the concubine or noble who dared to be so impolite.

Xiao Yan heaved a small sigh of relief at the reprieve, and hurried to follow behind Wanyan Shuo. Suddenly, he saw that Wanyan Shuo had suddenly ducked behind a large tree. Xiao Yan's heart was overtaken by surprise, poking his head out to take a look, he almost cried out in shock. Surrounded by palace maids and eunuchs, the person who was standing bent over with his hands held in a gesture of respect while being loudly berated was none other than Su Yi. And the master who was conducting herself in such a high and mighty fashion could not be anybody else; it was none other than Wanyan Xu's favourite concubine, Imperial Concubine Lady Yin.

He darted a quick look at Wanyan Shuo and saw that there were many complicated emotions in his eyes but he made no move to go forward. He understood clearly in his heart that Wanyan Shuo's feelings towards Su Yi were really very complex and

peculiar. Because he had loved and respected Su Yi so much, when he was deserted by Su Yi, the betrayal had cut him to the quick and the hate that followed was also similarly intense. In addition, if he were to step out now and go to Su Yi's defence, he would surely earn the mockery of the crowd, even if they did not dare to show it to his face, they would deride him for being spineless because he could not give up his feelings of affection for a traitor.

As for Concubine Yin, before Su Yi had come into their lives, she had been much favoured and pampered by Wanyan Xu. His clear favourite among all his consorts, she had thought that the position of Empress would soon be conferred upon her. Counting her chickens before they had hatched, her wishful dreams had been shattered by Su Yi. How could she not hate him? Nonetheless, the Emperor had concentrated the love meant for three thousand on the one Su Yi [2], therefore, she could only swallow her hatred, unable to retaliate against Su Yi. But who would have thought that within a blink of an eye, the high and mighty Empress had been reduced to the status of a slave.

She was still revelling in Su Yi's misfortunes when, as enemies sharing a narrow road, she crossed paths with Su Yi on this day. Lady Yin was a spoiled concubine after all, how would she ever be magnanimous enough not to cause a fuss using a pretext so as to vent some of her resentment? Su Yi had been crippled in one leg, and his mobility was compromised. Lady Yin quietly directed one of her eunuchs to bump into him so that he would fall right into her path. Subsequently, she ordered the eunuchs and palace maids to haul him up, and insisted that he had deliberately thrown himself in front of her so that she would trip. Not caring to preserve her own dignity, she began to curse loudly at him on the spot.

Of course, Su Yi would not get angry over the spiteful actions of a narrow-minded person or take her words to heart, but what he did not know was that his expressionless face would stoke Concubine Yin's fury. With a loud shout, she ordered the eunuch to fetch a whip, saying that she was going to teach this lowly slave who had no respect for his betters a lesson. In her mind, she was just beginning to anticipate the enjoyment she was going to derive from the vicious idea when she suddenly heard the sound of a cold voice drifting pass her ears: "Just one

day back into my Imperial Father's good graces, and my Mother Concubine's bearing has indeed become very impressive." In great fright, she turned her head only to be met with the sight of Wanyan Shuo emerging from behind a tree, wearing a grim expression on his face.

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If we are speaking about people within the palace, while it was true that the Empress Dowager and Wanyan Xu both inspired great fear in this Concubine Yin, the person she feared the most was actually none other than this little Crown Prince, Wanyan Shuo. She had always been a clever woman; smooth and slick, she could adapt and present an aspect of herself that would be most pleasing to her interlocutor. Her social graces had won her popularity with both the Empress Dowager and the Emperor; only Wanyan Shuo had never fallen for her attempts to win him over. If one were to compare them in terms of intellect, then Concubine Yin could not hope to catch up with him even if she were riding a horse and whipping it. Even before Su Yi had arrived in the palace, she had already suffered much bitterness at the hands of Wanyan Shuo. At first, she had thought that she would bring up Wanyan Shuo so as to strengthen her hand as the most suitable candidate for the position of Empress but in less than two months, she had been compelled to appear before Wanyan Xu to beg that the responsibility for the care of the Crown Prince be lifted from her. The little demon king had messed with her so much that she was truly scared of him.

On this occasion, she had immediately felt unsettled upon the mere sight of Wanyan Shuo, and then to make matters worse, he had said those words "Just one day back into my Imperial Father's good graces, and my Mother Concubine's bearing has indeed become very impressive." Her soul quailed even more and she was terror-struck. She knew clearly that, as a rule, this little devil hated all the concubines that had won favour with the Emperor, always saying that he blamed them for robbing him of his Imperial Father's love. Therefore, with the sole exception of Su Yi, in the past anybody who won His Majesty's favour would also be treated as an archenemy by Wanyan Shuo, who would feel personally offended by her. And now, her own arrogant manner had been witnessed by his eyes. What terrible luck she had! With

all haste, she hurriedly put away the bossy and domineering expression she had been wearing. Careful to accompany her words with a demure smile, she said: "I didn't know that the Crown Prince is here, did I get in your way? Aii, it's all the fault of this slave who does not bother to look where he's going. He actually wanted to trip me. I was angry and wanted to teach him a lesson but my behaviour was a little inappropriate." So saying, she hurriedly gave her attendants a meaningful look, and the eunuchs and palace maids quickly retreated. Again, she put on a winning smile and said: "Crown Prince, please do not let us hinder you any further."

Wanyan Shuo gave a derisive snort and said: "I'm not in a hurry, there's nothing much for me to attend to today. It seems like Mother Concubine is still unfamiliar with the rules for conduct in the palace, let your child expend a bit of effort to teach them to Mother Concubine. Although with Mother Concubine's natural aptitude, it will be difficult for you to acquire a complete understanding but there's nothing for it. Since you are my Mother Concubine, even if I'm wasting my time, I will have to try to educate you. We have to avoid having you make such an unseemly gaffe in front of others again. Even if we don't speak of the fact that it damages the majesty of our Jin Liao Empire and my Imperial Father to have one of the concubines behaving like this, your actions make it hard for my Imperial Grandmother and I to maintain even a shred of glory on our faces."

The colour of Concubine Yin's face was by turns, green and white, and she was gritting her teeth so hard that creaking could be heard. However, she did not dare to utter a single word. Wanyan Shuo looked at her. Pretending to be surprised, he said: "Mother Concubine's expression does not look very good, could it be that you feel that your child is not fit to school you [1]? If that's the case, it is a bit awkward. Why don't I go before my Imperial Father to ask for an official decree, that way Mother Concubine will surely be convinced of my teachings in both her words and her heart. Would that be alright?" With that said, he looked towards Su Yi, and pretending that he was speaking to himself, he said in a stage whisper: "Aii... Imperial Father has so many good qualities, his only flaw is that he cannot give up his feelings easily, that is such an undesirable trait."

When Concubine Yin heard these words, she got the drift immediately. She knew

that Wanyan Shuo meant them as a reminder to her that if this matter blew up and escalated all the way to Wanyan Xu, who was still enamoured with Su Yi, there would be dire consequences for her. His heart still ached over Su Yi, if he knew that she treated him so shabbily, he would definitely not let her off easily. Actually, even without Wanyan Shuo's reminder, she clearly knew the score in her heart. Although His Majesty came over to her and spent every night at her residence, this was merely a show that he put on for the benefit of others. The truth of the matter was that on every single night the spring [2] had been spent in emptiness. Not only that, he had dreamt every night, and in his dreams he had repeatedly and exclusively called out the name of this former Empress. These nightly occurrences were more than enough to prove that there was no lie in Wanyan Shuo's words. At once, her heart seized with fright. She was an intelligent person; naturally she would know what would benefit her and what would be a liability to her. Hurriedly, she decided to grin and bear it, saying: "Crown Prince must be joking, how would I ever dare to say that you [3] are not fit to be my teacher? From the top of this palace to the bottom, everybody in here knows that the Crown Prince is the most clever and quick-witted of all. If you have any more instructions for me, please do tell me, I will surely listen with respectful attention."

In a daze, Su Yi stared at Wanyan Shuo. How could he not understand that this little Crown Prince was actually coming to his aid? His heart was deeply moved; even at this stage, this child still gave his wellbeing so much thought. Pain pierced through Su Yi's heart and lungs; he found it difficult to breathe. When he saw the tactics Wanyan Shuo used to deal with Concubine Yin --- how every single word and sentence were chosen and constructed with precision to deliver attacks so stinging that he might as well have been pricking her with a needle --- even as an adult, Su Yi could not help but to be full of admiration for this child. Even now, he still doubted himself; exactly what had he done to deserve this type of undying loyalty from this cunning and ruthless Crown Prince so that he still tried to protect him whenever he could?

On the other hand, Xiao Yan, who was standing to the side, could finally feel greatly relieved, thinking in his heart: *Ever since Empress Su Yi was deposed and reduced to a slave, the Crown Prince's heart has not been able to rest easy and he's always*

looking to vent his frustrations on other people. It was just my luck that it was my turn to have my head on the chopping block, but who would have thought that we would run into this Concubine Yin on the way. She has become the outlet for his anger instead, and I have been granted deliverance. Xiao Yan was also appalled by Concubine Yin flagrantly throwing her weight around and using her superior position to abuse a slave. Her behaviour was worlds away from Su Yi's dignified conduct; even when he had been Empress, he had always treated the servants with grace and kindness. Thus, when Wanyan Shuo turned the tables on her, and used her own tactic of making a fuss under a pretext, not only did Xiao Yan not disapprove or object to his actions, he actually enjoyed the scene very much.

As for Wanyan Shuo, he was born with a poisonous tongue, and once he decided to unleash it on Concubine Yin and started to berate her, his subtle taunts were almost too much to take. Already unsteady on her feet at being caught in her malicious act by Wanyan Shuo, she could only stand there trembling with rage. Wanyan Shuo stopped his tongue-lashing only when he saw that this outrageous woman was about to faint due to her suppressed anger. With insincere courtesy, he said: "Mother Concubine really has the delicate body of a genteel lady; you can only stand for a while before you need an attendant to support you. Forget it, if I say too much at a single time, I doubt you can remember all of it anyway. I shall not waste my saliva. Of course, the most important factor is that I think that Mother Concubine's body can withstand it no more. I shall request that you return to your palace; you would not need your child to accompany you there, I trust?"

She had clenched her fists so tightly that the skin on Concubine Yin's palms had been torn up by her nails, but she could not do anything other than to force herself to put on a smiling face as she said: "Since the Crown Prince has put it that way, I shall take my leave. If the Crown Prince is free, then please visit at the Palace of Merciful Grace to play." So saying, she held on to an eunuch's hand for support and resentfully went her way. But Wanyan Shuo refused to let her off so easily. With a smile, he fired a parting shot: "I understand, I shall find some time to visit Mother Concubine at her residence to continue imparting my wisdom."

When Concubine Yin and her retinue had departed, Su Yi was left to face this

master and servant duo alone. The complicated feelings in his heart were difficult to bear, and he did not know what to say to this little Crown Prince, therefore he could only give him a respectful bow before turning to leave. What he did not expect was for Wanyan Shuo to suddenly step right in front of him to block his path, and articulating each word succinctly, he said: "Your child has helped Mother Empress to get out of a tight situation, could it be that Mother Empress does not even have a word of thanks for your child?"

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Su Yi's heart twisted with pain. He knew that Wanyan Shuo was still emotionally attached to him, but taking into account Su Yi's current situation and status, if Wanyan Shuo continued to have warm feelings towards him, Su Yi knew that this would only cause a hundred harms to him with not even a single benefit to balance it out. Therefore, he carefully restrained himself from showing even a shred of care and concern for the little boy in his speech. Instead, he offered another respectful bow and said: "Much thanks to the Crown Prince for coming to the aid of your humble servant."

Wanyan Shuo stared at him stubbornly. Suddenly, he extended a hand and grabbed Su Yi, saying loudly: "You... you clearly know that what I want is not this, you clearly know it."

Su Yi looked at this child and saw that he was doing his utmost to restrain his tears. Su Yi's heart was also distressed, and he wanted nothing more than to be able to take Wanyan Shuo into his arms to reassure him and to soothe away all his hurts. But now, he had no other option but to force himself to hide his true feelings and project an aura of indifference. Striving to be detached, he said: "I don't know what the Crown Prince wants?"

His hopes dashed, Wanyan Shuo released Su Yi and went over to a tall tree and slumped dejectedly against it. In an exhausted voice, he said: I want you to tell me that you had actually been falsely accused. I want you to tell me that you did not

actually betray my Imperial Father. I even want you to tell me that you truly love my Imperial Father and me. I... I am very greedy, correct?" He looked straight at Su Yi and said: "I very clearly know that these are impossible things, but I still want them, am I very useless? In truth, even I find this version of myself detestable. When did I, Wanyan Shuo, start to become so irresolute? I can't carry this burden, but neither can I put it down." He shook his head, stood up straight and said: "You should go." Without further ado, Wanyan Shuo also proceeded to leave. Su Yi perceived that there was a strange sense of weariness about the little boy's retreating figure and he gave a long sigh as he watched Wanyan Shuo go further and further away. When his silhouette had become naught but a small blur on the horizon, only then did Su Yi say in the direction of a nearby tree: "Miss Zi Yan, the Crown Prince is now far away, you can come out."

At these words, Zi Yan's figure appeared in front of Su Yi. She also looked at Wanyan Shuo's silhouette --- a mere speck now, just about to vanish --- and gave a sigh of frustration. She turned back and saw that Su Yi was looking at her with luminous eyes. In everything she had ever done, she had felt that she had the courage of her convictions, but in this time, at this moment, for some reason, she felt a trace of guilt beginning to plague her conscience and she inadvertently hung her head.

"Miss, is this the result that you wanted? To have the three of us living with such pain? It doesn't matter what happens to me, but Wanyan Xu and the Crown Prince are your masters and I believe that you have sincerely vowed loyalty and devotion to them with all your heart. Your aim was to cause them to become totally cynical, to divest them of all emotional ties so that they can become ruthless and calculating rulers. No matter the cost, no matter how painful the process is for them, it is all worth it in your eyes, is that right?" He could no longer contain the seething umbrage in his heart, nor could he be bothered to be mindful of his lowly status as a slave. With each word and sentence, he strove to strike at the most vulnerable part of Zi Yan's heart.

"Are you trying to make me go in front of the Emperor and help you to prove your innocence?" Unable to refute Su Yi's words, she could only choose to project the

image of a pitiless villain with her cold voice and disdainful words, so as to hide her conflicted heart.

“If that is what you think of Su Yi, then there is nothing left for me to say.” Su Yi did not spare her another glance and left, brushing by her side. After he took two or three steps, he suddenly stood still and said calmly: “I really wish for Miss to kill me. Let Wanyan Xu and the little Crown Prince grieve deeply over my passing for a period of time, after that they can finally let go of their pain. It is preferable to the situation we find ourselves in now, where we are tormenting each other with our very existence. At any rate, Miss's purpose was to get rid of me; with my death you can remove me once and for all. Or is it that Miss is afraid that you will have to shoulder the consequences if Wanyan Xu should investigate?”

Zi Yan was silent for a long time, before she suddenly said: “Actually, there is evidence that you had been framed in the very document that was used as proof of your guilt. But His Majesty and the Crown Prince were both overwhelmed by their concern for you, furthermore, the evidence is too subtle, that's why nobody was able to notice the discrepancy. General Su, have more patience and give it more time. If you are truly destined by Heaven to be the Empress of Jin Liao, then all the travails you are suffering now are simply tests Heaven has set for you to hone your mettle.”

When she finished her speech, Su Yi was stunned and could only stay rooted to his spot. He had never imagined that there would be a riddle yet to be uncovered buried within the words of his own prose. And yet Zi Yan had dared to so readily use such a poem as a key piece of incriminating evidence against him; when the very same piece of writing could absolve him of all guilt at any time. Su Yi was stunned by her audacity. This woman, she... what was she really thinking?

“General Su, although I hate you and still feel very uneasy about you being the Empress, but, in my heart I still hope that you will live to see the day when the dark clouds over you have cleared and you are bathed in sunshine again although I don't know why I feel this way. However, I will never take the initiative to step forward to clear your name. It's fine if you hate me; if you curse me, that's fine too. That's up to you. If there comes a day when you can re-occupy the position of Empress, then I

will accept without complaint whatever end you have in store for Zi Yan, whether it should be death or torture.” Zi Yan said these words calmly, her manner as casual as if she were discussing the merits of their surrounding scenery. When she finished, she turned and left, without a single look back at Su Yi.

Su Yi looked at her retreating back, but her words had made him even more confused. His thoughts were a jumbled mess, to the extent that he could not make heads or tails of them. In exasperation, he resolved to simply not think about them anymore and slowly made his way down the small path to the laundry room.

Just as he was approaching the entrance to the laundry room, Su Yi saw that a bunch of people were crowded around the door, chattering away furiously. Su Yi went up to take a look and saw that many old serving women and palace maids were surrounding a man, and with unsightly looks on their faces, they seemed to be lecturing him.

Su Yi's heart gave a tremor of surprise. Judging from this man's deportment, which was distinctly elegant and refined, he was most likely a member of the aristocracy. However, he wore clothes fashioned from coarse white cloth and the servants that had surrounded him were not showing the slightest deference or even politeness in their speech.

That stranger waited for the indignation of the crowd to run its course; only when they had quietened down, did he open his mouth to speak: “If all of you don’t wish to assist me in my search, that’s quite alright. But that garment was sewn for me by my mother with her own hands, and I would never send it here to be washed, nor have I ever done so. There was a new servant girl assigned to me recently, and being new, she didn’t know that that garment is special and she sent it here together with the rest of the laundry. Since you are not willing to help me look for it, I’ll do it myself, that shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

An old woman in the crowd gave a "humph" and said: “It would have been better if Your Highness had not mentioned the name of Her Ladyship Concubine Hua. Associating yourself with her does not reflect well on you at all. If Your Highness

does not mind that this place is both dirty and messy, then please do as you like.” So saying, she withdrew with the rest of the crowd. As they dispersed, they were wearing contemptuous smiles; they had obviously been highly entertained by the drama that had played out.

Su Yi knew that this room was full of clothes belonging to the eunuchs and palace maids; they were piled like mountains everywhere inside. As this Young Master did not have any understanding as to how the laundry was sorted, there was no way that he would be able to find what he was looking for. Although Su Yi was curious as to why the helpers in the laundry room had dared to be so rude to this prince, and also the reason why his laundry had been sent here to be washed together with the articles of servants when he had the status of a prince, Su Yi did not care to investigate further. Instead, he went forward to the man and said: “What does Your Highness's garment look like? If you could tell me, I might be able to be of some help.” When Su Yi had finished speaking, the Prince and the servants all uniformly cast their eyes at him. Without exception, the look in their eyes expressed amazement and incomprehension.

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A long time passed as everybody stared at Su Yi, to the point where he was wondering if they were trying to devour him with their eyes. As he was getting increasingly uncomfortable, he was relieved when that elegant man finally said: “In that case, thank you for your trouble, please lead the way.” He hurried inside the building, heading towards the room where all the laundry had been piled up, with the Prince following behind him silently.

After Su Yi had asked the Prince to describe the distinguishing features of the garment he was searching for, he immediately recalled that when he was sorting out the laundry that very morning, he had taken special note of a garment that matched his description. Although somewhat old-fashioned, it had been exquisitely detailed and meticulously constructed. At that time, Su Yi had thought that it was odd that eunuchs or palace attendants would own such a garment and as it turns out, its owner really wasn't an ordinary person. After searching his memory, Su Yi

rummaged around a pile of clothes, and finally found what he was looking for. He handed it over to that man, and said: "Is it this one?"

That Prince received the item of clothing from Su Yi's hands, handling it reverentially. With that, the calm and detached expression he had been wearing on his face relaxed and he could not help but to reveal some happiness. He nodded and said: "That's right, this is the one." He raised his head and looked at Su Yi before continuing: "Thank you very much, this is the only thing left to me by my dear but sadly departed mother. It is important beyond compare to me, if it weren't for your assistance, I would have regret gnawing away at me for the rest of my lifetime."

Su Yi gave a faint smile and said: "Think nothing of it, it did not cost me much effort." With that said, he walked out of the room. The Prince did not say anything more either. With his garment in hand, he left for his own palace without further ado. Here, the gossiping matrons and old women of the laundry service finally recovered their senses, rushing forward towards Su Yi and assailing him from all sides with their chatter: "Humph! You fawned on him because you think that he's an important Prince? You think you can use him to rehabilitate yourself and regain His Majesty's favour? Cease your wishful thinking! To tell you the truth, we called him 'Your Highness' as a favour. The hatred our Emperor bears for him is not less than the hatred he bears for you. From the top to the bottom, everybody in the palace knows that he is a thorn in His Majesty's side and the bane of his existence. If you keep on trying to ingratiate yourself with him, mind that the Emperor does not break the one good leg you have left!"

In his heart, Su Yi thought: *It would seem that the competition for the throne has caused yet another inevitable palace tragedy to play out.* Only, Wanyan Xu does not seem like such a vicious person. But then again, although he had remained devoted and forgiving to Su Yi after his transgressions, it did not necessarily mean that he would show the same gentleness to a brother that coveted his throne. When he thought of this, he could not help but to feel that Wanyan Xu had been somewhat overly harsh. But he would not allow himself to take to heart the malicious and provocative sarcasm of these women, without making any reply, he simply began to attend to his chores, fetching water and washing clothes.

The days flew by, another month passed, and the weather got colder by the day. On this day, after Su Yi had completed washing the lot of laundry assigned to him, the old woman who was in charge of the palace laundry service ordered him to go to the shore of the North Lake and bring back two large flat stones. The sky was gradually becoming gloomy and overcast, by the looks of it, there would soon be rain. Since the North Lake was an extremely long way from the laundry room, Su Yi did not dare to tarry and immediately went to the shore of the North Lake. He chose two suitable rocks and just as he had them strapped to his back, he heard a clap of thunder overhead and then the clouds burst. Heavy drops of rain beat down upon him; they fell fast and numerous, like a bag of beans being poured out. The wind also picked up its pace. Within moments, the blue dome of heaven had been replaced with a scene of dark sky and black earth and the rain had become a veritable torrent. Su Yi could see nothing beyond ten paces.

Su Yi hurriedly tried to increase his pace but in the face of the fierce storm, his efforts were in vain. Compared to the halcyon days of the past, his body was much thinner and weaker and he had been worn out by a day of exhausting manual labour. The heavy rocks strapped to his back provided the icing on the cake, thus after he had forced himself to take a few dozen paces, he began to pant laboriously. Fortunately for him, as someone who was trained in martial arts, his eyesight was sharper than most and he could see that there was a lonely little house in the near distance. He got the idea in his mind to seek shelter from the rain in that little house. He forced himself to hold out until he was under the eaves of that little house and his body finally gave up the last of its strength. He collapsed into the rainwater sluicing over the walkways.

He only had the time to take two deep breaths before he vaguely registered that a voice was drifting past his ears from the direction above his head. It said: "Come into the house to get out of this inclement weather." He lifted his head for a look, and saw an elegant and placid face; it was none other than the out-of-favour Prince that he had met in the laundry room that day. Su Yi watched as that man extended a spotless white hand, with long and slender fingers, towards him. Looking back at himself, he saw that he was covered all over with mud. In his heart, Su Yi thought

that as this Young Master had such an air of refinement about him, he must dislike getting dirty. Therefore Su Yi did not take his hand, endeavouring to stand up under his own powers. But how could he do that in his debilitated state? As he was struggling, that Young Master had taken hold of his hand, and held on steadily as he supported Su Yi by his arm. Su Yi looked at him with utter astonishment; he had not expected to find that this man would be a master in martial arts. In terms of martial arts, if he were to compare this Young Master's mastery with Wanyan Xu's, this Young Master's proficiency might actually be a close match.

By the time Su Yi finally made it into the house, he was in a totally battered and exhausted state. That Prince took a look at him and said with a smile: "Honourable sir cuts a sorry figure indeed, but he is still able to maintain such a serene attitude and wear a calm expression. Ordinary people will not be able to maintain such dignity. Such a distinguished person, how did he become a slave in the palace? Oh yes, you must have been an aristocrat when the former dynasty was in power, and was captured to serve as a slave when it was overthrown?"

When Su Yi realised that this Prince did not know who he was and considering that he resided in an isolated building erected by the side of the secluded North Lake, Su Yi concluded that he probably did not leave his house often nor did he have much interaction with the other denizens of the palace and was not au courant with palace affairs. Su Yi gave a sigh in his heart --- if only it were that simple. Without bothering to explain further, he simply nodded his head, feeling that he might as well agree tacitly to this uncomplicated explanation. Seeing that the rain showed no sign of stopping anytime soon, Su Yi decided to relieve himself of load he was carrying. As he placed the rocks down on the floor, suddenly a burst of gripping pain ripped through his abdomen. He unconsciously cried out "aiyo", and had to sink down into a squat.

The prince looked over and saw that his face had turned as white as a sheet and beads of moisture were rolling down his face, whether it was rain water or Su Yi had broken into cold sweat, the Prince could not say. He hurriedly asked Su Yi to tell him what was wrong, but Su Yi was so wracked with pain that he was unable to speak. A long time later, when the pain had somewhat lessened, Su Yi finally managed to

stand up. That Prince scrutinised Su Yi with rapt attention, before he suddenly said evenly: "Does your pain come after you have had your meal? Or does it happen when your stomach is empty?"

Su Yi had never given any thought to this matter before, and had to search his memory carefully for an answer when he heard the question. From what he could recall, these incidents mostly occurred when his stomach was empty. He quickly answered the question truthfully and that Prince asked again: "Then does the pain lighten up once you eat something?" When he saw Su Yi nod in reply, he carefully looked at Su Yi's complexion again and said solemnly: "You have to pay more attention to your diet in future and you have to try to eat things that are soft in texture and mild to the taste. You must not eat things that are coarse, sticky, hard or spicy, or else your condition will be exacerbated and could cause a serious illness."

So saying, he went over to a bookshelf and opening a drawer, he took out a small vial. He said mildly: "I have always had very little interaction with other people, and I do not wish to be in anybody's debt. Last time, you had done me a good turn, now let me repay my debt. This bottle of medicine was carefully fabricated by me, it will help to ease your pain. The number of doses is limited, so you should use it prudently. From now on, we are even." He turned his head to look outside the window. After checking on the weather, he said: "Right now, the rain has become much lighter. You should leave after you have finished this cup of hot tea. Don't mention to anyone else that you have been here, it will not benefit you in the slightest. I shall not see you off."

Su Yi thanked him and then turned to leave. In his heart, he felt that this person was really very strange and his character was also extremely cold. With the aid of the cup of hot tea, he managed to make his way back to the laundry room, albeit with much difficulty. As he put down the slabs of rock, those ladies and old women of the laundry service, seeing that he was almost overcome by fatigue, did not try to make things more difficult for him. He was finally allowed to return back to his own room, where he was met with his standard meal of a wotou and the remnants of soup, which had been left on the table.

He unconsciously gave a dry laugh as he recalled the words of that strange Prince. He heaved a sigh and mused aloud to himself: "Heaven, and not I, is in control of my life." Without further preamble, he had his meal. After that, he changed into a set of dry clothes and was suddenly overcome by a spell of dizziness. Unable to control his body, he collapsed onto the bed with his heartbeat racing in irregular patterns. He gave a few harsh coughs and felt that his nose had become congested. He lay there and wondered; when did he become so delicate, that just being drenched for a while was enough to cause him to fall ill. Suddenly he heard a cough from beyond the door, and then the door promptly opened. Along with the wind and rain, a tall and imposing figure quickly stepped into the room.

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It's him, of course it was him, and it could only be him. Su Yi could only laugh bitterly in his heart as he thought: *Wanyan Xu oh Wanyan Xu, are you still unable to give up your feelings for me even now? Oh, you're the Emperor; naturally you already have to bear the heavy responsibility of looking after the country. To come all the way here during such a stormy night, what shall we do if you should be affected by the chilly weather and take ill? With all the stress you must be under, you really ought to take better care of your body. You... can't you let me feel that my debt to you is not so deep? What you're doing... only causes me to feel even more heartache.*

A large hand descended upon his forehead, brushing it gently. Wanyan Xu muttered softly to himself: "Indeed, it is a little too hot." He sighed, and saw that Su Yi's eyes were still closed although he could not tell if Su Yi was really asleep or if he were just feigning sleep to avoid himself. But then again, since the paths they had taken had brought them to this point, if Su Yi were awake and they had to face each other, perhaps the scene would be even more awkward and wretched. He had been carrying something wedged between his arm and his side, and now he unfolded it to reveal a wolf-fur quilt. Softly, he laid it out over Su Yi's body. Because of the raging winds and pouring rain, the corners were a little damp; he made sure to keep them away from Su Yi. After that, Wanyan Xu stood up and retrieved a bowl from the table. Extracting a small packet of medicine that was tucked away in the front of his

robes, he poured it into the bowl. He managed to find a porcelain vessel in a corner of the room that was still half-full of cold water. He sighed, there was nothing for it, he was going to have to warm it up over a flame. He lit the brazier, and as he was warming up the water over it, he looked over to Su Yi. When he saw that Su Yi had not roused at all, he knew that Su Yi was deliberately trying to avoid him. Wanyan Xu could only silently wait for the water to boil before pouring it into the bowl of medicine and carrying it over to the head of Su Yi's bed.

He stooped down to look intently at Su Yi. At the sight of that pale and wan face, the pain he felt was akin to having his heart thrown into a vat of boiling oil. Why was it that even when the situation between them had become so untenable, he was still unable to set aside the feelings he bore for his Su Su? He might have resented him, he might even have hated him, but why was it that all these feelings immediately transformed into concern over Su Su's well-being when he saw that the weather was turning?

"Su Su, if you would just... just admit that you were wrong... as long as you will... you know that I [1] could never refuse you." He softly whispered to the "sleeping" Su Yi. Although he clearly knew that his obstinate lover could never bring himself to compromise, although he clearly knew that to say these words would only show his own uselessness and could even be considered as inviting humiliation, but he still clung to the hope that Su Yi would be moved by his deep and enduring love. Even if Su Yi would only be willing to make the smallest gesture of contrition, so that Wanyan Xu could use that as a pretence to justify reinstating Su Yi in front of the courtiers and the Empress Dowager, even if he had to shove false arguments down their throats. He refused to give up this beautiful fantasy, for its sake, he would go to any lengths, even if he would provoke Su Yi's ridicule and contempt.

His eyes were glimmering with hope, but when Su Yi's face remained impassive and totally devoid of any expression, his hopes gradually died and his eyes dimmed. Haha, perhaps he is really too persistent, so persistent that it was ludicrous. Maybe Su Yi was already doing him a favour by helping him save face just by not getting up and treating him to a display of frigid irony and scorching satire. If that was so, then he would rather believe that the person in front of him was really sound asleep

because he was under the weather.

He kept trying to delude himself, he wanted believe his delusions so badly that he actually became convinced that Su Yi was really soundly asleep in the bed and had been from the start. Because that was the only way he would dare to indulge in a little bit of his own selfish desires. He slowly, very slowly, leaned forward to those red lips that he had not touched for such a long time, slowly he inched forward. Finally he planted a light kiss --- as superficial as the contact a dragonfly makes with the water as it skims over its surface --- on those lips, before hurriedly retreating. Enough, that was enough, even though he could not linger further, even though he could not do as much as he would like, but with just this light touch, he knew that the taste of those red lips had not changed at all, they were still exactly as lovely as he remembered and as he dreamed of. He quickly got up, and said gently: "I'm sorry, Su Su, this little bit is all I can do for you now." After he said that, he hurriedly left without a single look back, afraid that if were to tarry further, his tears would leak out uncontrollably.

His forlorn figure quickly disappeared in the rain. Only then did the two old and dilapidated wooden doors fall shut heavily. Su Yi finally opened his eyes, which he had been holding tightly shut now. A stream of clear tears flowed down, following the contours of his facial features. By the faint light of the candle, he stared avidly at the bowl of medicine at his bedside, which was still steaming hot and reverently stroked the soft wolf-skin quilt that was draped over his body. Suddenly, he said softly to himself: "It's enough, Wanyan Xu, I am contented with just this. Su Yi has no regrets in his life because he has you." With that said, he reached for the bowl and emptied its contents in one big gulp. In tears, but wearing a smile, he said: "I will work hard to protect myself; I will do my best to live on well. I will avail myself of every chance I get to look at you, until... until the time comes when I really cannot go on living anymore."

In the blink of an eye, the time of flowing streams and falling flowers was over, and the wintry season was upon them. Today, there had been heavily snowfall during the day and as night fell, crystalline snowflakes were swirling around in the space between Heaven and Earth. The Empress Dowager and both Wanyan Xu and his son loved snowy weather very much, and they especially enjoyed admiring the red plum blossoms against the snowy white backdrop of such weather. By chance, when Wanyan Xu and Wanyan Shuo made a visit to the residence of the Empress Dowager to ask after her health, Concubine Yin and a few other concubines were also there keeping her company and fawning over her. The Empress Dowager was in a happy mood and said to Wanyan Xu: "Concubine Yin was just telling me that many of the trees in the plum tree grove in the Imperial Gardens have started to flower and we have made plans to spend the day there tomorrow. I have sent people to make the place ready, we can view the plum blossoms as we drink and listen to poetry. I think that would be the most enjoyable way to pass the time, what do the both of you think?"

Wanyan Xu quickly smiled as he replied: "We'll do as Empress Mother wishes." The Empress Dowager was even more pleased; however when she cast a glance over the room, she happened to notice that Wanyan Shuo was gazing out a window, seemingly in a daze. She could not help laughing and asked: "Shuo Er, you have always loved to play, if you heard this plan you would be jumping for joy usually. How come you are not so enthusiastic today? Could it be that your Imperial Father has forced more lessons on you, so that you are tired now?"

His reverie disrupted, Wanyan Shuo turned back and said with a forced laugh: "Imperial Grandma, who said I don't like it. Also, Imperial Father did not force me to do more homework. As long as my old grandmother [2] is happy, Shuo Er will naturally be happy too. I'll accompany you tomorrow and we can listen to poetry for the whole day, wouldn't that be nice? It's just that... aii... this weather is too cold, it would be better if it were a bit warmer."

Standing to the side, Concubine Yin laughed and said: "His Highness the Crown Prince would have been happy, it's just that I think that there is someone in his heart that he cannot let go of and he is worried about that person since the weather is so

bitterly cold. I do not wish to criticise the Crown Prince, but no matter how good that person was in the past, today he is still a servant after all. Is it worth it for you to be so concerned about him?"

The Empress Dowager and Wanyan Xu immediately understood the situation. They could only make light of it with a laugh, but Concubine Yin had stabbed at a sensitive spot in Wanyan Shuo's heart, and he flew into a rage because of his humiliation. Wanyan Shuo was the scion of a ruling House; prideful by nature, he believed in avenging every slight and insult that was inflicted upon him. Although he knew that Concubine Yin only dared to be so audacious to him because she was betting that he would not dare to openly humiliate her in the presence of the Empress Dowager and his own Imperial Father, there was no way that he was going to take this lying down. He was quiet for a bit as he debated his options. Suddenly, he squinted; a stratagem had come to his mind.

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With the idea in mind, Wanyan Shuo smiled coldly and said: "Why would Mother Concubine say that? It just occurred to my mind that when the weather is so bitterly cold, the herdsman of Jin Liao who wander the northern plains would have to endure even more hardship than usual. I am the person who will inherit the throne, naturally I have been taught from a young age to be concerned about national affairs. I am not as fortunate as Mother Concubine, who only has to win the favour of Imperial Grandma and Imperial Father to be able to live a free and easy life, not having to give a care about anything else. Speaking of this, you can now be considered the most senior consort in the Imperial Harem, as such you should also spare some consideration about our country. But you invariably choose to eat, drink and make merry. Humph humph, since you are the one who brought up the former Empress, I might as well bring him into the conversation. If... if he were here, I wonder if he would be as uncaring to the pain and difficulties faced by the common folk as you? Although he has betrayed Imperial Father, but when it comes to this point, he is really much superior to you."

By the time he had finished, Concubine Yin was so apoplectic with rage that she could not say a word. But the Empress Dowager smiled and said: "Shuo Er is still so combative. Your Mother Concubine only made an innocent comment, but just look at you. That's enough, that person is guilty of a heinous crime, we should not spare him another thought." With that said, she went over and hugged this grandson, whom she doted on, and said: "But I am really very happy to see that Shuo Er is concerned about the people, my grandson is finally growing up. From your words, I know that when you ascend the throne in future, your achievements would not be lesser than your Imperial Father's." She then looked at Wanyan Xu and said: "How come you always say the Shuo Er only wishes to have fun, isn't he behaving like a proper heir to the throne now?"

Wanyan Shuo's words had also brought back many memories to Wanyan Xu's mind, when he heard the Empress Dowager's question, he had to quickly gather up his wits to muster a reply. Smiling, he said: "Yes, Mother Empress can carry on spoiling him, he's getting ever more undisciplined and out-of-control." With that said, he looked back to his son. He saw that Wanyan Shuo's eyes were still fixed on Concubine Yin, looking her up and down, as if sizing her up. Wanyan Xu knew his son well enough to immediately understand that Wanyan Shuo still had a few tricks up his sleeve in store for her. But Wanyan Xu was touched to see that he still missed Su Yi, and a sudden wave of affection washed over him. Although he knew that Wanyan Shuo was deliberately taunting Concubine Yin to vent his anger, he decided not to stop him, instead he looked on with a smile on his face.

As he expected, Wanyan Shuo piped up again and said: "But Imperial Grandma, what's the use of us sitting here and worrying about it? The herdsmen in the north are really in dire straits, if their cattle and sheep should freeze to death in this weather, then their existence would become quite hopeless." So saying, he jumped out of the Empress Dowager's embrace and said: "Imperial Grandma, I have a good idea, we can set aside some money and give them subsidies so that they can build warm bullpens and barns for their animals. Their livestock is also their lifeblood, if we can prevent even some of them from freezing to death, their livelihood would be more secure." After that, he stared at Concubine Yin with bright and sparkling eyes and after a few chortles, he said: "I know that after Imperial Father moved the capital

to Dou Yan, he granted a lot of tax breaks and exemptions to the people. Although there is still a lot of silver in the Imperial Treasury, we need to have plenty of reserves to cope with sudden emergencies like war or natural disasters, it is really not prudent to disburse money from the treasury for this matter at this time. But I see that Imperial Father has rewarded many of my Mother Concubines with rare jewels that used to belong to the previous dynasty. Why don't we sell those jewels instead, and use the funds raised to provide subsidies to the northern plainsmen? Well, since I'm the person who came up with this proposal, I'll take the lead and donate the ink slab and writing brush that Imperial Father presented to me, this writing set is said to have belonged to the legendary Fu Xi Emperor [3]. Hehe, it can be considered my most prized possession, a priceless treasure indeed. My Mother Concubines should not try to selfishly squirrel away their own treasures too."

In one breath, he had set his plan in motion. Among the gathered concubines, there was none who were not aghast at the prospect. In their alarm, their faces had blanched. As Wanyan Shuo had anticipated, these women valued their precious gems and jewellery like their lives depended on them. Unfortunately for them, the Empress Dowager was unequivocal in her approval and praise, saying: "This is a plan full of virtue indeed. I will contribute a treasure as well. Bring me the pair of 'Five Phoenixes of the Sunrise Hairpins with Hanging Pearls' [4]."

Wanyan Shuo was on the verge of bursting into gleeful laughter. On the other hand, Wanyan Xu was both exasperated and amused. He knew very well that this mischievous little imp did not care at all for the Four Treasures of the Study [5] or anything associated with calligraphy and scholarship. However illustrious its provenance or how high its value, he had been itching to get rid of it. The little scamp also loved to wander around the palace, and get into places where he was not supposed to be. Thus he knew very well what sorts of precious objects and jewellery were in the residences of each concubine. If he was really going to see this game to its conclusion, then the women could not hope to have even half a piece of jewellery left by the time he was done. Wanyan Xu looked at Concubine Yin and saw that this most unfortunate concubine was on the verge of dissolving into tears.

He could not help but to heave a heavy sigh and thought: when it comes to matters

concerning the people, really, there was nobody who could compare to Su Su. If he were still the Empress, he would certainly be pleased that the Imperial Heir is mindful of the needs of the common people and he would not hesitate to empty his own pockets to help the commoners. *Aii, only the people have a place in his heart, but I wish that he could have a trace of selfishness too. If only he could be a bit like these concubines and put the people aside in his mind occasionally, and try to win my favour. But fate makes playthings of all men; he could never do anything like that in future nor would he.*

With a single move, Wanyan Shuo had gotten his revenge, and the feelings of gloom in his chest lifted considerably. He said to the Empress Dowager: "Imperial Grandma, is there anything else you would like to prepare? Your grandson will go and instruct people to carry out this plan now." When the Empress Dowager shook her head, he left in great excitement, and heard Wanyan Xu shouting from behind: "Put on another layer of clothing." And then he commanded Zi Nong to follow the Crown Prince personally. When Wanyan Shuo turned back for a look, he saw that Zi Nong was indeed following behind him. Shaking her head, she smiled and said: "Crown Prince, slow down a bit and wait for your humble servant."

The two of them came to the grove of plum trees and saw that the trees were covered with tens of thousands of red blossoms that were in full bloom or just beginning to flower. When contrasted with the pristine white snow, the picture they created was one of ethereal beauty. Wanyan Shuo smiled and said: "When Imperial Grandma sees such scenery tomorrow, she will surely be delighted." So saying, he went inside a small little hall constructed in the midst of the trees and saw that various eunuchs and palace maids were busy laying out tables and chairs in the most pleasing arrangements. Everything was being thoughtfully prepared.

He was feeling very happy, when he suddenly heard someone's voice from beyond the door: "What are you doing here?" This was followed by a familiar voice, who replied: "Oh, the curtains and mosquito nets that were sent to the laundry a few days ago have been washed and ironed, please have a look and receive them if there is nothing amiss." Wanyan Shuo's heart stopped for a beat, and after exchanging a glance with Zi Nong, he found that his companion also wore a look of alarm on her

face. He hesitated for a while, but he finally made his decision and bounded out of the little hall in large steps, only to see that Su Yi had already gone far away. When surrounded by the snowy landscape, his solitary figure looked especially lonely and desolate, as if he were enveloped by a shroud of endless chill.

Wanyan Shuo looked on silently, before he suddenly said to Zi Nong: "Take a plate of snacks from the hall and bring it to him. This cold weather must be difficult for him... his legs are already not good..." At this point, his eyes filled up with tears and he slowly turned away. Zi Nong also welcomed such an order very much and hurriedly piled a plate high with assorted pastries and delicacies before hurrying after Su Yi. But she suddenly heard Wanyan Shuo call after her: "Zi Nong, wait." She slowly turned her body back, not knowing what the Crown prince was about to say.

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Wanyan Shuo looked at her, after giving a bitter laugh, he said: "Remember, do not let him know that I was the one who sent the food to him. He will... he will surely find it laughable." With that, he waved a hand and said: "Go on, I will also go back to my palace."

Zi Nong felt immensely moved; she knew that although the little Crown Prince still ached when he saw Su Yi suffer, but he was also still bitter over his defection. Furthermore he felt that it was a sign of weakness to send cakes and snacks to Su Yi, which was why he had given her such instructions, lest Su Yi found his actions worthy of ridicule. She stood stock still for a while, lost in thought, before hurrying out the door. By then, Su Yi had already gone far away.

She hurriedly chased after Su Yi. When Su Yi heard the sound of quickly approaching footsteps coming from behind him, he could not help but to turn back for a look. When he saw that it was Zi Nong, he was immediately rooted to the spot. When Zi Nong saw that, she could only halt her own steps. The two of them stood there staring at each other; neither the servant nor the master [1] knew how to begin speaking, or what they should say.

After Su Yi had been deposed, he had had the opportunity to interact with both Wanyan Xu and his son; of the people he had been close to, Zi Nong was the only person left whom he had not had contact with since his disgrace. When he saw that she was holding a tray of pastries, he could not help but to be reminded of that fateful day on the Imperial Boat when he had sent her off to fetch him a box of snacks so as to give Zi Yan an opportunity to say those words to him in private. Now that he thought of it, it all seem to have happened yesterday, but in reality the blue seas had turned to mulberry fields; while the situation may be familiar, the people had undergone great transformations.

Zi Nong was also afraid that other people will witness their encounter. If people with ill intentions, for example Concubine Yin, should see what Zi Nong was doing, she would certainly take the opportunity to create trouble by going in front of the Empress Dowager to raise an ill wind. Zi Nong wasn't afraid for herself, after all she was Wanyan Xu's personal attendant, but she was afraid on Su Yi's behalf. Although the Empress Dowager was kindly and benevolent, she was deeply disgusted with Su Yi for betraying the Emperor. If she wasn't fast, among the courtiers, there would not be one who would hesitate to take advantage of the situation to persecute Su Yi who had long ago lost the veneration he commanded from them when he had been the Empress. When she thought of this, she had to force a smile onto her face as she said: "The weather has turned cold, Young Master should put on more layers of clothes. Please take these snacks with you and enjoy them. They will help to warm you up some." So saying, she hung her head. A tear had already trickled down her cheek. Without further explanation, she thrust the tray of snacks into Su Yi's hands before turning. She left so fast that she seemed to be flying.

Su Yi stood there holding the tray of snacks. Although the weather was cold, and he had been chilled to the bone, the encounter left him with a very warm feeling in his heart. Although human feelings could be said to be as changeable as the weather, but even up to the present time, Wanyan Xu and Wanyan Shuo still remained concerned about him. Even Zi Nong, who by right should hate him, also could not bear to do so. Su Yi did not know where else he could look for such loyalty, or what he had done to deserve it. At this thought, although he could feel moisture creeping

into his eyes, a trace of a smile began to play around the corners of his lips. Unable to help himself, he picked up a piece of food with his fingers and put it into his mouth. The scrumptious pastry seemed to melt in his mouth; tendrils of sweetness began to weave through his body and concentrated in Su Yi's heart, which felt steeped in warmth. Even the bitterly cold weather did not seem to be as difficult to endure as it had previously. He carefully covered this cherished tray of snacks with a layer of his clothing and went to his room to hide it before returning to the laundry room to resume his tasks.

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On the second day, sure enough, the Empress Dowager and various concubines including Concubine Yin went to tour the Plum Tree Grove. Wanyan Xu originally did not pay the matter much mind but the Empress Dowager was keenly interested and even dispatched an attendant to send for him. Under these circumstances, he had to make an appearance. When he arrived, he took a look around and saw that Wanyan Shuo was also present. He could not help but to smile and say: "You must have found an excuse to shirk your studies and slip here to have fun? You only know how to play..."

Before he could finish, the Empress Dowager rushed to Wanyan Shuo's defence, saying: "What are you scolding him for, it was I [2] who told him to come here. It is a happy day today, nobody is to say anything to dampen the atmosphere."

Wanyan Xu quickly agreed, and they walked around the grove leisurely while admiring the plum blossoms. After they had walked around for a long time, the Empress Dowager was finally satisfied and said that she was tired. Only then did they proceed into the small hall to take a seat. Inside, the stove had already been lit, and the room was as cosy and warm as spring. Like a flowing steam, servers were bringing around dozens of trays of snacks and osmanthus flower brews and distinguished female storytellers was sent for to come and entertain them. As they

began to eat and drink, the atmosphere was lively and cheery.

After some time, the two storytellers had already narrated two tales, and Concubine Yin could see that the Empress Dowager was beginning to lose interest. She quickly smiled and said: "Empress Dowager, we would get bored quickly if we only listen to stories. Why don't we send for a troupe of entertainers as well? We can listen to music and watch some dances, wouldn't that be nice?"

The Empress Dowager nodded as she said smilingly: Why haven't I thought of this idea myself? But I think that we should not ask for dancers today. Dances are at their best when the performers can wear light clothes, so that their sleeves and skirts can sway with their movements. Wouldn't it be a sin if we make people dress that way on such a cold day as this? I loved to listen to the flute when I was younger, now I am old and I have not heard it for many years. Why don't we just send for an exceptional flute player instead and have that person play a few masterpieces for us? What do you all think?"

Of course, no one among the assembled crowd would dare to be a spoilsport, and they all hurried to express their agreement. Wanyan Xu promptly ordered someone to send for the flutist and a while later, an ordinary looking woman came into the hall. After she had formally greeted the Imperial family, someone set up a chair for her and the Empress Dowager said: "Pick a song that you are proficient at and play it for us." Holding her flute horizontally, she began to play a tune, and a mellifluous melody began to radiate from her flute to fill the room.

At first, Wanyan Xu was highly entertained by the music, but he was soon lulled into a trance, remembering that during the autumn of the previous year, when he was in the sandy desert, he had also heard a tune with a melody that tugged at his heartstrings. To remember that tune now, he felt that there was something even more heartbreakingly poignant about that melody. As he was reminiscing, he happened to glance out the window. Whether it was fate or coincidence, Wanyan Xu immediately saw the very flutist that he had been thinking of, who had now become the lover whose face haunted his dreams every night. Gazing at that distant silhouette when he was in the midst of the warm hall which was bustling with cheer

and sounds of merriment, he found that Su Yi seem to cut an especially lonely figure in contrast. He took a closer look. Although they were separated by a long distance, he could still see clearly that Su Yi was carrying two large buckets of water and was shuffling with much difficulty along the snow-covered stone path.

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At this moment, all sorts of different feelings welled up in Wanyan Xu's heart, and he sighed faintly. Wanyan Shuo had sharp ears, on picking up his Imperial Father's faint sigh, he quickly came over to investigate and immediately fell silent as well. When the Empress Dowager, Concubine Yin and the rest noticed the pair of them acting so peculiarly, they were inevitable curious. The hall was set with windows all along its walls, so glancing in the same direction, the crowd could see what it was that had arrested the attention of Wanyan Xu and his son. When they saw the lonely figure in the snow, they were similarly stumped.

At the moment, the weather was bitterly cold; a thick mantle of snow had covered the grounds as far as the eye could see, seemingly forming a layer of solid ice. Su Yi was hauling two large buckets of water; his body was laden down, his legs were already unsound, therefore he could only slowly and deliberately take each step as he made his way along the stone path. His clothes were thin and worn, unable to provide much protection against the cold. Fortunately, due to his former position as a military man, he had been obliged to practice martial arts religiously and he could deploy his inner force to help in resisting the chill. If it wasn't so, he would have been frozen to death.

But the stone steps were narrow; covered with a layer of snow and ice, they were quite hazardous. After a moment of inattention, they say Su Yi's foot slip on the slippery ground, and he tumbled to the ground. Zi Nong gave an alarmed cry, and hurriedly covered her mouth to muffle the sound but it was too late. Everyone looked towards Su Yi again, and saw that after being jostled, half of the water had spilled out from both of the buckets. In the cold weather, the water formed into ice in mere moments. Quite a large quantity of water had also spilled onto Su Yi's clothes, and

now, they were similarly frosted over. Su Yi quickly extended his hand to grab hold of the buckets, and managed to steady himself with much difficulty. However, because of his damaged leg, he could not manage to crawl up again and in a blink of an eye, he had taken a few more tumbles. As for the water, it had been thoroughly spilled.

Wanyan Xu couldn't bear to see anymore; turning his head and averting his eyes. Because he was fighting back hot tears, his eyes soon turned red and slightly swollen. The Empress Dowager was by nature compassionate and merciful, when she saw this scene, her heart couldn't help but be distressed. Although the Empress Dowager hated Su Yi for what he had done, she could not help but to take pity on him when she saw this scene.

She glanced towards her son and sighed: "I wonder he still feels that this is worth his trouble? He could have been an honoured Empress, but instead he has to suffer a hard life now." So saying, she called over her personal maid, Xiao Chu, and instructed her: "Find someone to go and help him up. This is a cold day, we should not make someone suffer like this. By right, he should have been executed. In any case, he was a general with great strength of character, he should have preferred death over suffering this kind of humiliation and becoming an object of pity. It makes one's heart uncomfortable to look at him now."

Wanyan Xu had nothing to say. Intellectually speaking, he had to admit that his Mother Empress was correct. But emotionally, he still could not countenance the thought of Su Yi dying. Seeing that Xiao Chu was about to depart from the hall, he hurriedly stopped her. Facing the Empress Dowager, he said with a smile: "Mother Empress, what did you think of the two tunes you have just heard?"

The Empress Dowager nodded and said: "Naturally, they were considered good. Although they can't be said to have the power to transport one to Heaven, such a degree of skill is rare." Contrary to her expectations, Wanyan Xu smiled and said: "Naturally, these two tunes we just heard can be considered rare. However, your child knows of a person who can be said to have achieved perfection when it comes to playing the flute. Truly, a person with such superlative skill comes by only a few times in history."

The Empress Dowager was extremely delighted and said smilingly: “Oh, there is such a person? Quickly call that person here and let me [1] listen to his music. I can be considered to have heard much flute music, but I cannot imagine someone being as good as you say. Let me have an eye-opening experience today.” With that, she reproached Wanyan Xu, saying: “I can see that Imperial Son does not have me in his heart. You know that I love listening to the flute, why did you not send such a virtuoso to play for me sooner?”

Wanyan Xu said: “Your child would never dare to not keep Mother Empress in my heart. It is actually because I [2] too have only heard him play once, and it only happened by chance during the autumn of last year. Mother Empress knows that your child does not pay much mind to such things; I tend to forget them quickly as time passes. I am only reminded of that incident today because I heard these tunes. But Empress Mother, it is quite difficult to send for this person.”

The Empress Dowager gave a “humph” and said: “What do you mean that it's difficult to send for him, don't tell me that he gives himself airs and graces? Among people who practice the arts, there will be some that are aloof and proud but they should not look down on the masses; that would cause people to be disgusted with them” So saying she furrowed her brows and frowned. Wanyan Xu hurried to clarify, saying: “Reporting to Mother Empress, this person is really very easy-going, it's just that he's now... he's now been condemned as a criminal, your child is afraid that Mother Empress would not approve of his presence.” So saying, he looked out at the window again and saw that Su Yi had finally regained his feet after much difficulty. Still carrying the two buckets, he was making his way back down the stairs with great caution but going back down was even more difficult for him. In the blink of an eye, he was sprawled out on the ground again. Then, he seemed to have decided that it would be easier for him to get down in a sitting position and proceeded to manoeuvre himself down the steps that way. Fortunately the buckets were already empty and no water will spill out.

From the look in Wanyan Xu's eyes, the Empress Dowager already understood. In her heart, she understood that her son was saddened when he saw Su Yi suffering

and specifically wished to have him come over to the hall to warm up. However, he could not say this out loud; instead he was using his skills with the flute as a cover to achieve that aim. Although her first inclination was to agree, she hesitated, thinking: *No matter what, Su Yi is a traitor of the state now, how can he be permitted to be in the presence of the Emperor just because I wish to listen to the flute. It would not look good in front of these concubines.* But if she did not allow it, her son would not have a way out of this embarrassing situation, and furthermore she felt that both of them were to be pitied. Unable to make up her mind, she pondered in silence.

Wanyan Shuo had also understood his father's intentions at once. His own heart was also churning with emotion but because of the presence of his Imperial Grandma, he did not dare to let them show. Just when he was trying to suppress his feelings, he suddenly saw an opportunity. Somehow, Imperial Grandmother looked as though she was wavering. Pretending to be oblivious to his Imperial Father's plan, he said: "Ah, there is person like that? Quickly send for him, I want to hear him play." So saying, he further urged Wanyan Xu: "Imperial Father, quickly ask Big Sister Xiao Chu to fetch that person here since she's on the way out. I'm impatient and want to listen to such a wonderful song."

The Empress Dowager looked at her grandson, in the end, she could not bear to gainsay him and finally relented, saying: "No matter who that person is, there is no reason why I cannot see him. My Imperial Son, tell Xiao Chu who that person is and she can send for that person when she goes out." With that said, she addressed the concubines, saying: "We can take the opportunity and broaden our knowledge and experience."

Wanyan Xu was overjoyed at this unexpected turn of events and promptly agreed. He went up to Xiao Chu and said something to her, after which she left to carry out her orders. By this time, Wanyan Shuo and Zi Nong had been reduced to the same state as him and were filled with impatience as well as anticipation. Even the Empress Dowager was curious, wondering how good a flutist a general could be. For a time, the gathered crowd was casting looks at the door with impatience; in their eagerness, they had lost all interest in the victuals. After a long time, they finally

heard Xiao Chu's voice at the door, saying: "Reporting to the Empress Dowager and the Emperor, on your orders, your humble servant has brought forth the slave Su Yi for an audience." The Empress Dowager gave an "en" [3] sound before saying: "Bring him in." At once, everybody's eyes were fixed upon the curtains hanging above the doorway.

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A few young maids lifted the curtains and showed them into the hall. After Su Yi had paid his respects, he stood to the side and said calmly: "To send for Su Yi today, I wonder what instructions the Empress Dowager has for me." With his unyielding-to-the-death character, naturally he would refuse to refer to himself as a slave. The Empress Dowager did not quibble over this, instead she looked him up and down, sizing him up. In her heart she could not help but to feel some grudging respect for him, thinking: *no wonder Imperial Son is still obsessed with him to this day, and even Shuo Er is no exception. Indeed, he has an exceptionally distinguished bearing. Just from looking at him here and now, even with his present status, he is still neither servile nor overbearing; not resentful or combative. Doubtlessly, these concubines cannot compare with him in terms of character.*

Therefore, she said: I have not summoned you for anything else, just that I [1] have heard from my Imperial Son that you are very proficient in playing the flute. Therefore I wished to hear your music for myself. I wonder if General Su would be willing to play a tune for me?" She had developed some goodwill towards Su Yi, therefore a smile began to grace her face as she spoke to him. She even referred to him as "General Su", implicitly acknowledging that he had a noble character that would never admit defeat and was worthy of respect.

Su Yi quickly raised his head; he had never expected that this Empress Dowager of Jin Liao would be so magnanimous. After he had been crowned as the Emperor, he had not had much opportunity to interact with the Empress Dowager, since she tended not to venture out from her palace very often and also, she had not required that he visit her to pay his respects daily. At this moment, his heart was filled with

gratitude and he said sincerely: "Su Yi is unworthy of being thus honoured by receiving such lavish praise from the Empress Dowager and the Emperor, and wishes only to comply. Only, I have not played this song for a very long time. Also, the tune is simple and unpolished, I am afraid that it would cause offence to your sacred ears." As he was saying this, his heart was feeling bewildered --- he had never, not once, played the flute since he had been taken prisoner, so how did Wanyan Xu know that he had that ability?

The Empress Dowager smiled and said: "General Su is too modest." Having said that, she promptly ordered someone to go and fetch a flute but Wanyan Xu said: "Mother Empress, that would not be necessary, I [2] have already ordered Zi Nong to fetch one." Su Yi felt even yet more amazed. A while later, Zi Nong returned; in her hands, she was holding a flute crafted of black bamboo. When Su Yi took a closer look, he grew even more shocked and was in danger of weeping. Zi Nong approached him and presenting the flute to Su Yi with both hands, she said: "When Young Master was captured, all your material possessions were given to Zi Nong to preserve. There has been no wear and tear on them. General Su, please test the sound and see if the sound this flute produces is the same as you remember from days past."

Su Yi took a look at Zi Nong, before he had to avert his gaze. In his heart a hundred different sensations were churning, and simultaneously, strong emotions were surging up violently. Su Yi did not speak further, holding the flute horizontally across his lips, he started to play. In an instant, wisps of musical notes wafted from the space between the side of his lips and fingertips, quiet yet evocative, like whispered secrets on an otherwise silent night. In that melody, hard-to-describe passions were faintly discernible, hidden through a veil of mist. Love and hate lingered in the tones, beguiling all who heard it. After Su Yi had played for a while, without exception, everybody in that room was totally enthralled. They felt like the music was slowly entering their body through their ears, and was slowly winding its way through to their tendons and organs. Just as they were absorbed in this feeling, suddenly the tune took a turn. The tempo and pitch picked up, reverberating throughout the hall. The tune now took on the flavour of Bai Juyi's [1] line "a silver bottle is smashed and water gushes forth, armoured horsemen rush forth onto the battlefield with the clang

of a thousand weapons”, it was like claps of thunder and whipping winds rolling in from the Heavens. Yet another turn, and the impression became one of a homeless drifter enduring the winds and rains, then sweet and mild emotions and thoughts, then love and hate without reason, and finally of clouds dispersing and rain ceasing, leaving a few strands of residual hate and love to remain entangled, fluttering in the wind with no anchor to rely on. At the finish, all was quiet.

Su Yi had poured out all of his own feelings into this song; the notes had flowed smoothly from his flute without conscious thought. When he was spent, and the song finished, he put away the flute. Without exception, everybody in the hall was entranced and deeply moved. Indeed, Wanyan Xu had not been exaggerating when he had described his skill as "a person with such superlative skill comes by only a few times in history". Considering the circumstances and his own history with the flutist, the song stirred up even more emotions in Wanyan Xu than the rest of the audience and he was almost in a stupor.

Presently, the Empress Dowager was the first to recover her senses, and exclaimed her praise: "Indeed, this must be the peak of perfection! It has the power to move deities and spirits. Only today, do I truly understand what can be considered a good song, and what good skills are. But General Su, I do not know the name of this song; I am puzzled as to why I have never heard this masterpiece before."

Su Yi said subduedly: "This song has no name; it was a composition that I had just made up on the spur of the moment, Su Yi must have incurred the Empress Dowager's ridicule through his poor performance. At the moment, I still have tasks that I have to attend to, I beg the Empress Dowager for permission to retire."

A sombre expression also manifested on the Empress Dowager's face, after a long pause, she said: "Alright, but since General Su had to compose a song on the spot for us, you must be overtaxed now." So saying, she called Xiao Chu over and said: "Go and instruct the overseers that they are not to let General Su get more tired today." She then turned back to Su Yi and said: "General, please proceed."

After Su Yi formally took his leave, he finally left. Throughout the entire affair, he had

not looked at Wanyan Xu even once, but on Wanyan Xu's part, his eyes had never strayed from Su Yi even a fraction. Even so, without interacting, both of them tacitly understood the affection and painful difficulties that lay between them, and keenly felt the love and hate that dogged them both. Even the Empress Dowager could not help but to feel troubled when she looked at these two men, and could only think ruefully to herself that fate makes playthings of all men.

For a time, nobody spoke and the hall was silent. The spell was broken when Wanyan Shuo hastily went up and said: "Imperial Grandma, why don't you allow me to learn how to play the flute from him? I like the song he played." When he saw that the Empress Dowager had been pleased by Su Yi's performance, he had thought to seize the opportunity to help Su Yi escape from the abyss of suffering. But contrary to his expectations, the Empress Dowager shook her head and said: "That cannot be permitted. Even if we don't consider that he now has the status of a traitor and slave, it will still be inappropriate. You are the Crown Prince; the responsibility of governing the country will be yours in future. The flute is just an instrument of entertainment, how can you expend your energies on it. I do not wish to see you become absorbed by this hobby and play a tune that would cause the fall of our nation."

There was no hidden meaning behind her careless words, but the listening Wanyan Xu misunderstood them. In a low tone, he said: "Mother Empress's words are off the mark. Su Yi's defeat was caused by domestic issues within the country of Qi. The weak and fatuous Emperor of Qi was the one who wrought the disaster, it had no relationship to Su Yi's playing the flute. If his troops had not been deprived of food and other military supplies in the days before our battle, even if it was I who fought against him, I do not dare to say with certainty that I would have been the victor."

The Empress Dowager gave him a glance and understood that his heart was still occupied with thoughts of Su Yi. She made no comment on that, but only said blandly: "I was discussing the merits of Shuo Er learning the flute, why is Imperial Son drawing apophenic connections?" So saying, she stood up and said: "We have thoroughly amused ourselves for the whole day, it is about time that we end this gathering. The New Year will come soon, there is no reason to be afraid that there will be no further opportunities to have fun, is there?" The assembled crowd dutifully

echoed agreement, and surrounded the Empress Dowager and Wanyan Xu as they departed. At this point, no one would have thought that it would be during the coming New Year's Eve that the palace would be thrown in complete confusion because of Su Yi. But of course, these words can only be spoken with the benefit of hindsight.

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On the twenty-ninth day of the twelfth lunar month, all the necessary goods that would be used in the celebration of the New Year in the palace were already in place. On the thirtieth day, snow had been falling since early morning. When Wanyan Xu visited the Empress Dowager to pay his respects, the two were both in high spirits. Wanyan Xu gave a sigh and said: "The previous monarch of Qi was dissolute and tyrannical, such a great country was afflicted with all ills under his rule. Although I [1] have reduced taxes and duties to ease the suffering of the people, they still need a period of time before they can recover the quality of life that they enjoyed under the reign of his predecessor. A timely snow [2] has fallen today, if the following year brings good weather and harvests, then the people will be able to make an almost complete recovery by this time next year."

The Empress Dowager nodded her head and said: "That's just what I was about to say." She then turned her head towards Concubine Yin and the rest and said: "Later today will be the night of New Year's Eve [3]; because this is the first New Year we would be spending in this new capital, we are afraid that people will especially miss the familiar lands of Jin Liao today. Therefore my Imperial Son and I [4] decided that we might as well invite all the high officials and their kin into the palace to spend the New Year. That way the monarch and courtiers can make merry together; not only will the atmosphere be more lively but the melancholy feelings of homesickness can be avoided. All of you concubines should also make ready, you can take the opportunity to enjoy yourselves tonight." Concubine Yin and her cohorts nodded and agreed, and showered the idea with much praise.

When the courtiers arrived in the palace, everywhere they turned, their eyes were met with beauty and splendour, not to mention, there was endless amusements and

entertainment for their enjoyment. However, we shall not speak more on that. Instead, we shall go back to Su Yi. Because the laundry service had rushed to finish washing all the clothes before the twenty-eighth of the twelfth lunar month, there was nothing else to be done in the laundry room. Therefore, Su Yi had been dispatched to other places to assist in other tasks for two days. Although it could be said that there were numerous staff in the palace; regrettably, before the New Year, there were many things to be done and the organisation had become chaotic. Therefore, during these two days, Su Yi was considerably more fatigued by his work than he usually was. After he had finally gotten back to his room the previous night, he had started to feel deeply uncomfortable in his gut. He felt faintly nauseous, and had no desire to eat anything at all. When hit by hunger pangs, he merely broke off bits from the wotou and grazed lightly. The medicine that that strange Prince had given to him had run out long ago; sometimes when the pains flared up, he had no alternative but to grit his teeth and endure them, even when his forehead was covered with cold sweat.

Today, the thirtieth day of the twelfth lunar month, Su Yi woke up early and saw that a heavy snow was descending from the heavens, and the palace grounds seemed to have been transformed into a world composed of silver ice and white snow. This was a good omen, and everybody in the palace was happy except for Su Yi. He did not understand why, but a trace of dismay was born in his heart. He silently stared out at the picturesque scene for a while, just when he was about to get dressed and get out of bed, his gut gave a sharp twist and he was overtaken by a wave of nausea. Before he knew what happened, he had spit a large mouthful of blood onto the floor! Only then did his body feel somewhat more comfortable.

Su Yi wasn't bothered; he simply got up and found some earth [5] to cover the traces of blood. After he had gotten drenched during the rainstorm months ago, he had developed the symptom of vomiting blood a few days later and it had persisted till now. Although the Prince had warned him to pay attention to his dietary habits, someone in Su Yi's situation had little say in the food that was allocated to him. Therefore, he could only endure this hardship silently; whenever he vomited blood, all he could do was to rest for a while on the bed, and it would go away after he skipped a few meals. Fortunately, besides his spitting out a few small mouthfuls of

blood occasionally, there were no further symptoms and his illness did not seem to be worsening.

But today, he suddenly felt that it was no longer such a simple matter as before. Even as evening fell, his appetite had still not returned and his stomach was still roiling. The pain was becoming ever more unbearable, the nausea felt heavier and heavier, his head was spinning, his vision was getting cloudy and his body felt totally sapped of any strength. Even his footsteps were weak and laborious. He was a practitioner of martial arts and as such, he had always paid particular attention to the firmness of his step but somehow, he simply was unable to achieve that today. He looked at the blanket of timely snow that covered everything as far as his eyes could see, the whiteness was piercing to his eyes and the foreboding feeling in his heart grew even stronger rapidly.

As he was lost in his thoughts, he suddenly heard an acerbic voice near. It said: "What? Don't tell me you also wish to celebrate the New Year today? The people in the front buildings are so busy that they are about to collapse and you are still standing here instead of going over to help?" He raised his head for a look, and found that it was the big girl from the laundry service, Ai Er. Like Su Yi, she had also been transferred to help out at the front halls because there were no more tasks to be done in the laundry room. She was feeling harried by the seemingly endless tasks when she suddenly passed this way and came upon Su Yi. When she saw Su Yi, there was no way that she would not immediately enlist his service.

Su Yi had no other choice but to endure the pain in his body and follow her to the palace halls and rooms one after another. He could see that in the large --- it could comfortably accommodate a few hundred people --- reception hall at the ground floor of the Garden of Merriment, multitudes of silhouettes were milling about and he could hear continual sounds of laughter and happy voices. Palace maids and eunuchs were going back and forth from the hall in an endless cycle, sending up platters of exquisite hors d'oeuvres and tea. At this point, Su Yi was in so much pain that the sweat was dripping off him like rain, but there was nothing he could do but force himself to endure it as he helped with the delivery of boxes and replenishing oil in the lamps. Because he deliberately performed his tasks in a dark corner, and

because Wanyan Xu and the other people at the banquet had no expectations that he would be present, his presence remained unnoticed by the revellers.

With much difficulty, he managed to endure his suffering into nightfall. By then the weather had turned very warm, there was no trace of wind at all and the snow had gradually stopped falling. At this time, dinner was being served and courses of food and wine were being carried into the big hall. Su Yi saw that there was no place for him to extend a helping hand, and searched out a quiet corner. Looking around, he saw that there was nobody around in all four directions. By then, his legs refused to support him any longer. With a groan of "aii", he sank down into a squatting position. He had been busy for the whole day, and had not even had the time to take a sip of tea. At this moment, his stomach was rumbling with hunger and his pain and nausea grew steadily worse. In the end, he again spit out two large mouthfuls of blood but this time, he did not feel any relief nor was there any improvement in his condition. This situation was really vastly different from what he had experienced in the past.

Su Yi attentively gazed at the traces of blood in silence for a long while before suddenly giving a long exhale. Speaking to himself, he sighed: "Could it be that this New Year's Eve night, just when it should be time to reunite with family, will be the time that I, Su Yi, will depart from this world forever?" Upon the thought that he would never again see that handsome face that was so full of military bearing, how he would never again feel even the slightest bit of his tender love or hatred, Su Yi at once felt a pain in his heart that was akin to having it twisted around a blade. He looked towards the lovely hall. At the moment, it was brightly lit but no matter how hard Su Yi tried, he could not see the figure that he had dreamed of every day and every night.

He managed to shift forwards a few steps, thinking in his heart: *if Heaven has pity on me, Su Yi, then please let me have a glance before I go. Even if I can only take one look from afar, my reluctance to leave this mortal world would also be lessened.* Once he thought of what would become of Wanyan Xu and his son after Su Yi's own passing, his heart was filled to the brim with worries that he could not set aside. But there was also nothing he could do about it; he could only console himself, thinking in his heart: *no matter what feelings they might have, how can any*

emotion withstand the erosion of time and the passing of years? Even if they experience heartache now, they would be fine after a year or so.

He did his utmost to search for that figure with his eyes but suddenly, he heard an anxious voice say: "Hey, the person over there, come over quickly and give us a hand." He turned back, to be met with the sight of four men carrying a disk that was as big as a chariot wheel. On the disk was a huge roasted sheep [6] and they were heading in the direction of the reception hall. One of the men among them was wearing an intense look of pain on his face, and rushed towards Su Yi, saying: "Quickly, come and replace me. My stomach is aching badly, I have to go and relieve myself at once." Su Yi hesitated for a moment, but in that short span of time, that man had already relinquished his post and left the large dish to the care of his three companions. Without any further explanation, he came to Su Yi and dragged him over to them before leaving hastily. Su Yi had no alternative but to endure his pain and the four of them carried the sheep in the direction of the reception hall. But he kept his head bowed, for fear of being recognised by the crowd. Waves of nausea were rising in his larynx, which he forcefully suppressed with his chi after much difficulty.

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As it turns out, this dish of roasted sheep was the customary main dish in a Jin Liao New Year's Eve feast; it was expected to be served at such occasions to symbolize that the coming year would be happy and peaceful and that the country would prosper while the people would be at peace. Therefore in the hearts of the people of Jin Liao, it was no less important than praying for blessings or offering sacrifices to the gods and ancestors. Even people who were very impoverished and could not afford a whole sheep also felt the need to buy morsels of sheep such as mutton, mutton tripe and sheep bones in order to prepare such a dish. Those people who were carrying this important dish into the hall were perennially working in the kitchen; thus, they did not recognise Su Yi. If that were not the case, even if they were at their last gasp, they would not have dared to let him lift the dish, much less because of a simple case of diarrhoea.

At the moment, the big hall was filled with the sounds of happy conversation and laughter. The Empress Dowager, Wanyan Xu and his son were seated at one of the tables together with a few important ministers. Below the dais were more tables; a few dozen of the surrounding tables were occupied by ministers and the womenfolk of their families. Wanyan Xu's concubines were also seated at the tables occupied by the womenfolk and were engaged in merry banter with them. Although the tables were laden with dishes of food, nobody touched their chopsticks. They were all waiting for the dish of roasted sheep to be served up before they proceeded to enjoy the feast.

Wanyan Shuo was just telling the Empress Dowager of how many fireworks he intended to release after the banquet but when the Empress Dowager laughed and said he wasn't allowed to do anything of that sort, he began to act like a spoiled child trying to cajole her into letting him do as he wished by wheedling. But he heard Wanyan Xu say suddenly with good humour: "Shuo Er, stop making a fuss. The roasted sheep is about to be served, don't you just love eating dishes that are the specialities of the Great Qi [1]? Why don't you pick out a good seat and sit down?" He then turned to the ministers and said smilingly: "The Crown Prince is naughty and mischievous, we really do not know we should teach him some discipline. All of you have children in your families, how do you usually guide them?" All of the ministers echoed each other as they said: "Your Majesty must be joking with us, aren't all children just like that? Besides, the Crown Prince is clever and quick-witted. At such a young age, he already has the bearing of a sovereign, when he ascends the throne in future, he would surely be able to lead our Jin Liao country and people into continued peace and prosperity."

Wanyan Xu nodded his head and smiled, but made no reply. He glanced outside the hall, and saw that the people bringing the roasted sheep were quite close now. In a flash, he seemed to have seen Su Yi. He found it strange, thinking in his heart: *how could he be here, and how would he have been given this task?* When he sought to take a closer look, that person had been obscured by the sheep. He could not help but laugh bitterly at himself, thinking: *my eyesight was probably blurred; because I think of him so much, I have even started to dream of him even during the*

waking hours.

Consequently, he called Zi Nong over and instructed her: “Later, when you notice that people are not paying attention to you, take the opportunity to deliver some specialties of Great Qi and hot food to Su Su's room. On this New Year's Eve night, he must be feeling very sad in his heart. Besides this reminder of the destruction of his country, he is also spending it all alone; I [2] cannot imagine how difficult he must find his circumstances now. You should accompany him and talk for a while, perhaps you can ease his sorrow. This is the most important day of the year, no matter what, do not let him be focused only on thinking about unlucky things.”

Zi Nong agreed. Turning away, she was met with the sight of Zi Yan staring at her. There was a complicated look in Zi Yan's eyes, which startled Zi Nong, and she couldn't help saying in surprise: “What are you doing? Are you trying to scare people to death?”

Zi Yan furrowed her brows and frowned. Sighing, she said: “His Majesty is still thinking of that person?” Zi Nong gave a “humph” and said: “Didn't you already hear everything? Why bother to ask me? You are the one who detest Young Master the most, so why be concerned about him now?”

Zi Yan made no reply, abruptly she turned away. As she was walking away, she murmured to herself: “He can't forget, he still can't forget. Even on a day like this, Master is still saddened, he is still thinking of him, his heart still misses him. Don't tell me... Don't tell me that I really have to repudiate my original intention? How could that be, how could that possibly be...” As she was muttering to herself, suddenly, her ears were met with the sound of silence. The hall had quietened down all of a sudden. Turning her head for a look, she saw that the roast sheep had already been carried into the hall. Everybody's eyes were fixed on this auspicious dish, and enjoying the delicious aroma that wafted off of it; naturally they were too absorbed to speak.

Zi Nong and the other attendants were all smiling, and hurried over to the back of Wanyan Xu and the Empress Dowager, ready to serve them the dish. The countless

pairs of eyes of the ministers were also fixed upon this huge sheep that was about to be carried to the table of the Emperor and Empress Dowager.

Suddenly they all saw that the dish had started to slant, the south corner had begun drooping down. The other three people hurriedly tried to rebalance their load, but because the combined weight of the sheep and dish was really too heavy, they had no hope of recovering in such a short time. Everybody in the crowd could only look on helplessly as the huge platter, as well as the sheep that was on top of it, came crashing to the ground. Needless to say, the plate was smashed into pieces but that was immaterial. The most important thing was that the sheep had also become contaminated with dust, which was totally unacceptable.

At this moment, everybody's face had turned pale, the Empress Dowager, Wanyan Xu and the rest of the important people had stood up. The three bearers had long ago fallen to their knees and started to kowtow, knocking their heads against the ground like they were merely heads of garlic, utterly terrified they said: "Your slave deserves death, your slave deserves death." Only the person who had been lifting up the south end of the lamb dish did not kneel and beg forgiveness, instead he could only squat down and clutch at his mouth and stomach with each of his hands. Upon a careful look, that person was none other than Su Yi.

Upon the realisation, the expressions of everybody changed and Yu Cang suddenly stood up. He said in a loud voice: "Who was the person who let this slave carry the sheep? How could anybody not know that he harbours evil intentions in his heart? His actions today are clearly intended to curse our Jin Liao Empire, so that our fortunes will begin to decline." So saying, he turned to Wanyan Xu and said: "Your Majesty, the crime he has committed is great, and his evil intentions are extreme. Your Majesty cannot be excessively lenient towards him anymore." When these words left his lips, the other officials also began to echo his sentiments.

Suddenly the crisp and clear tones of a child's voice said: "Shut your mouth, my Imperial Father has not spoken yet, it is hardly your turn to be making irresponsible remarks." It was none other than the little Crown Prince Wanyan Shuo. With urgent steps, he descended from the high platform, heading straight towards Su Yi's side.

At this moment, Su Yi's head was spinning, his vision had become blurred and cold sweat was dripping off his forehead. When he heard Wanyan Shuo's footsteps approaching, he reluctantly forced himself to get up, and made to leave the hall. Concubine Yin had just loudly exclaimed: "Audacious slave, quickly tidy up..." But that's all she dared to say, after being treated to a fierce glare by Wanyan Shuo, she did not make another sound.

Zi Nong and the rest had also bounded down towards Su Yi. Su Yi's body was felt as weak as putty, his vision was cloudy and he knew that he could not possibly make it out of the hall in his condition. He could only use up all the inner strength left to him to force the mouthful of blood back down into his throat and barely managed to choke these words out: "I... I will go and find something... here... to tidy up..." So saying, he made to go.

His stomach was in such churning pain that it felt like there seas and rivers were being overturned inside and there were innumerable things that were being tossed around. Su Yi knew full well that if he didn't actively resist for even a split second, a great quantity of blood will gush forth from his mouth. With Wanyan Xu, Wanyan Shuo, Zi Nong and the rest still so profoundly attached emotionally to him, how could he let himself die right in front of them just like that. He could not let such a tragic and cruel scene be their last memory of him, lest it cast a shadow over the rest of their lives. In addition, this was the night of the New Year's Eve, for him to die at a feast was also an ill omen. Therefore he clenched his teeth, locking his jaw tightly he took a few steps forward, wishing that he could fly out the hall at this moment. He would do anything just to get through this moment.

Suddenly he heard a low and steady voice ring out, saying: "Stop right there." All at once, everybody stopped speaking and looked at Wanyan Xu, stunned. Wanyan Shuo and the rest also halted their steps as they looked at him, only to see that he was coming down the dais, step by deliberate step. He looked at Su Yi with luminous eyes and saw that Su Yi was still trying to leave the hall but finally, his weakened legs could support him no longer and he sank to his knees in front of a pillar. He rushed forward to support Su Yi with steps so swift that he appeared to be flying, and

saw that his beloved's face was as white as paper and beads of sweat as large as soybeans were rolling down his face. That pair of eyes had already lost their lustre, and when they gazed at Wanyan Xu, he couldn't tell if the expression in them was of love, of pain, of sadness. One of his hands was hanging limply by his side, while the other was still tightly clamped over his nose and mouth. Wanyan Xu was greatly startled by this sight, and a chill shook his body as a portentous feeling of impending doom began to rise up from the bottom of his heart.

“Su Su...” He could only say these words; he found that he could not bear to continue. Wanyan Xu sluggishly raised his hand, forcing himself to keep his mind calm and not to look into Su Yi's pleading eyes, he grasped Su Yi's sleeve firmly. Whether it was that he had lost control over his trembling fingers and they refused to do as he wished, or whether he did not dare to tug that sleeve down for fear of what may happen, he couldn't say. He only knew that his own teeth had begun chattering. However, under the present circumstances, he really did not have the luxury of hesitating any further. He could only harden his heart, and abruptly pulled down Su Yi's weak arm that could put up no resistance. In an instant, a sheet of brilliant but menacing red flashed past his eyes. Su Yi could hold it in no longer, and big mouthfuls of blood gushed out one after another, all of them staining Wanyan Xu's dragon robes.

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“Su... Su Su...” Wanyan Xu was so horror-struck by this situation that had arisen so abruptly that he had almost lost his wits. He persisted in this state until Su Yi, who had finally used up the last of his strength and could no longer hold himself up, toppled softly into his arms. Only then did he seem to awake from his trance and at long last, his mind came to process all that had transpired. All of a sudden, he gave a forceful roar that tore at one's heart and cracked one's lungs: “Su Su...” And then he tightly hugged Su Yi's broken and limp body, in panic he wildly cried out: “Somebody come... Zi Liu... Zi Liu... Su Su, what happened to you? What is happening to you?”

Blood was still spilling out in large spurts from Su Yi's mouth, with movements that

were clumsy from being flustered, Wanyan Xu hurriedly covered his mouth. Tears of fright were slipping down his face and he implored Su Yi with a choked voice: "Su Su... Su Su... don't throw up anymore, I beg you not to throw up anymore..." Wanyan Shuo, Zi Nong and the rest, who had been standing to the side had also rushed to crowd around Su Yi. Suddenly, they heard a genteel voice say loudly: "Everybody, give way. Your Majesty please remove your hand, let Young Master get rid of all the residual blood in his body." As it turned out, the voice belonged to none other than Zi Liu. She had gone to the back room to fetch a cloak for Wanyan Xu when she suddenly heard his voice coming from the hall in front. His tone of his voice had changed drastically and he was calling for her. When she came back to the hall, with a single look, she roughly understood what had happened. Now, she quickly stepped forward and saw that Su Yi's chest, as well as Wanyan Xu's robes, was sodden with fresh blood. At the sight, Zi Liu could not stop her own face from turning pale; lifting Su Yi's wrist, she took his pulse [1] for a little while before slowly getting back onto her feet, while hanging her head.

Just from her actions, Wanyan Xu and Zi Nong, etcetera could clearly understand how the situation stood. Wanyan Xu embraced Su Yi even more tightly. He suddenly tugged at the front of Zi Liu's jacket and looked at her with crazed eyes as he loudly hissed between his teeth: "No... Su Su's only vomiting blood, Zi Liu, I [2] order you to save his life... I know you will be able to save his life... Zi Liu..."

Suddenly he heard a small, reedy voice coming from below, saying: "Wanyan [3], don't be like this..." He quickly looked down at Su Yi, only to see that a melancholic smile had taken up residence at the corners of Su Yi's blood-stained lips.

Laboriously, Su Yi raised a hand and wiped away the tears that had covered Wanyan Xu's face before saying tenderly: "Everyone has to die at some point, don't be sad, or else... or else when I go... I will not be at peace." Su Yi took a glance around the whole room and saw Wanyan Shuo. The boy had been scared silly and at this time, he could only weep. Quickly, Su Yi grabbed his hand and said: "Child, don't cry. You should... you should forget all about me quickly... I... in this life, I am already deeply in the debt of you and your father... if... if you still shed tears over me... it is not worth it... moreover... moreover it is not... something that a monarch should do..."

At this point, he had to stop and gasp a few times for air, suddenly a fresh burst of fishy sweetness rose in his throat and again, he spit out another large mouthful of blood. At the moment, in his heart, he had ten-thousand words that he wished to say, but he was unable to speak even one word and could only try to convey them with his eyes by looking at Wanyan Xu over and over again. The look in his eyes was one of manifold reluctance to part, but also said that he was helpless to prevent it.

Zi Liu's heart was greatly pained; this disease that caused the afflicted to vomit blood in such quantity was invariably a death sentence, but when she saw the look in Su Yi's eyes, a feeling of adamant resolution unexpectedly took hold in her heart and she was determined to pit all the healing skills she had learned in her lifetime against the disease in a bid to save his life. Therefore, she quickly said: "Your Majesty, since Young Master is not vomiting blood for now, quickly carry him to the bed on the second floor. It is important that he can lie down horizontally now. Your servant... your servant... will do her utmost to try to save his life."

Wanyan Xu hurriedly picked up Su Yi and made to carry him to the second storey, but suddenly, he saw that all the ministers were standing in front of him. In unison, they said: "Your Majesty, Su Yi is guilty of a heinous crime. By right, he should have been put to death but because of Your Majesty's magnanimity, he was spared the death penalty. Now that he is beset with serious illness, it must be Heaven's will. We beseech Your Majesty to do what is best for our state and our lands [4]." The meaning behind their words was crystal clear --- it didn't matter if Su Yi died because he was merely a criminal that should have died long ago.

"All of you... give way, I demand of you..." Wanyan Xu looked at these important ministers viciously, the look in his eyes was akin to a wild wolf mother whose cubs were being threatened with death. His Su Su, his pitiful Su Su, he was the one who had caused Su Su's doom and these people had been his accomplices. Why bring up the country and the land, why bring up guilty of a heinous crime. His Su Su's time on earth was already running out, why did these people still refuse to let him off, why did they still refuse to let Wanyan Xu off? He saw that the ministers were still bowing with their hands cupped in a gesture of obeisance, but they made no move to get out

of his way.

Fury and panic finally overtook his heart and he yelled: "All of you... will you only be satisfied when he breathes his last in front of your eyes? Just how far do you intend to push me? Get lost, I want all of you to get lost. At the most I won't be the Emperor anymore, I don't want the throne anymore, alright?" He looked at Su Yi, who had fallen into an unconscious state in his embrace and felt that his own liver and guts were being cut into pieces, such was his pain. He pressed his face against that icy-cold cheek, with tears pouring down his face like rain, he said: "Su Su, I won't be the Emperor anymore, I will go with you. We'll look for a place that is just like the Garden of the Peaches of Immortality [5] and we'll live there, just the two of us. We will no longer be burdened with responsibility towards the country and people, we will no longer be constrained by the etiquette required of us by ministers, we... just the two of us..."

The gathered ministers looked at each other, but none of them were willing to step aside. Yu Cang and Concubine Yin looked upon this scene and their hearts were secretly rejoicing. Suddenly they saw that Zi Yan had stepped forward, after looking around at all the ministers she said in a solemn voice: "Honourable sirs, please leave. The most important thing now is to save a life. Shortly, when the dust has settled, His Majesty will naturally give an account of this matter to all of you." When the crowd heard her words, they did not find them remarkable, except for Yu Cang, who got a shock. He stared at her closely, but Zi Yan did not give him even a single glance.

"I'll say it one more time; all of you get out of my way, or else don't blame me for being merciless." Wanyan Xu raised his head once again and the tone of his words harboured a sinister coldness that had not been present before. He didn't care anymore, what of courtiers, what of criminals; they could all go to hell for all he cared. He only wanted his Su Su, as long as he could once again have his Su Su standing in front of him with a gentle smile, he would do anything. If anyone dared to hinder him, he would kill that person.

"Withdraw, all of you. Or are you trying to force an abdication? As Zi Yan has said,

you will have an explanation in the days to come. At the moment, the Emperor is indisposed from heartache, and he is not in the right frame of mind. There is no need for you to press him so insistently. I [6] will have all of you withdraw now. Or do you mean to say that just because the Emperor wishes to save someone, you all feel that it is necessary to stage a rebellion?" At this critical juncture, the Empress Dowager finally stepped up. After the ministers exchanged a few more glances with each other, they finally hastily withdrew and said as one: "Your subject would never dare."

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Here Wanyan Xu carried Su Yi in his arms and hurried to the second floor. After Wanyan Xu had laid him flat on the bed, he saw that his beloved had already entered into a coma. In panic and anxiety, he jerked his head up abruptly only to be met with a very familiar scene. As it turns out, this was the very bedroom that they had shared when Su Yi was the Empress. After Su Yi had been relegated to the position of a slave, Wanyan Xu had never again stepped foot into this place. Now, he could see familiar objects everywhere he looked, reminders of happier times, but the owner of this house was now faced with dangerous circumstances where there were nine possibilities of death and only one path to life. At this thought, the griping pain in his heart increased by a measure; knocking the wind out of his sails, causing him to feel as though he could hardly breathe and leaving him gasping for air.

By this time, Zi Liu had already begun to busy herself with trying to treat Su Yi. With silver needles, she administered acupuncture and she ordered servants to go to the study in her own residence and fetch her medicines that might help Su Yi. The Empress Dowager, Wanyan Xu, his son and the rest of the people were all watching intently as Zi Liu worked, but they could see that Su Yi's internal bleeding had not been stemmed even a little. At regular intervals, he would spit out a large mouthful of blood. This continued till midnight, whereupon Zi Liu stood up and even before she spoke, tears had begun to stream down her face. She turned to Wanyan Xu and said: "Your Majesty, your humble servant has done all that she can, but since... since Young Master no longer has the strength to reverse this desperate situation, it is better... better to start making preparations... I think." So saying, she couldn't stop

herself from bursting into tears, but still, the three words "for the funeral" refused to leave her lips.

Wanyan Xu felt like he was no longer in possession of a heart, that he was no longer in possession of a soul. With wooden steps, he walked to Su Yi's side and sat down. He saw that his beloved had now regained his consciousness and his eyes were opened slightly. He gripped Su Yi's thin hands --- so withered and dried out by the cold that thin cracks had appeared in the skin --- with his own and said in a gentle murmur: "Su Su... let's go... let's go to a place that is like the fabled Garden of the Peaches of Immortality, when you are well... we shall leave immediately, alright? Will you still be willing to be by my [1] side?"

Wanyan Shuo had begun to bawl loudly some time ago, but fortunately, the Empress Dowager had taken him into her arms and cuddled him in an effort to comfort him. Now, when she saw the way her son was behaving like this, so clearly very different from his usual manner, she couldn't help but be struck by fear for him in her heart. She saw that Su Yi was giving Wanyan Xu a weak smile and he whispered to him softly: "Wanyan, don't be like this. Although I cannot be by your side and watch over you in future, you should not be regretful."

Here, he had to stop and take a few deeps breaths before he could continue. He sighed and then said faintly: "Wanyan, don't be sad. In life the most important things can be summed up by two words, love and devotion. Admittedly, my devotion has been given to my doomed country and the people of that defeated homeland. But as for that word 'love', I have given it to somebody else. That person is the single most important enemy and opponent I have encountered in my life. He is the ruler of all under Heaven, he defeated me as quickly as a snap of the finger and furthermore, he obliterated my Great Qi. Overnight, he wrested control of everything that I held to be of utmost import in my life. But... this is also the man that gave to me the most beautiful memories of my life. I can still remember how, when I lay in his arms, I would get the most comfortable and warm feeling. When he was being gentle, he could really make me drunk on the infinite affection he showed me. No matter how much I admonished myself, the final outcome was inevitable; I could not restrain my own emotions. Wanyan Xu, I... I am still but an ordinary man after all."

Su Yi looked straight into his beloved's eyes and a gently smile suddenly blossomed on his face. Saying each word clearly, he said: "Do you know who that person is?" And then, he slowly closed his eyes again, after giving a relieved sigh, he said: "Actually, you should be thankful that I have come to this stage of my life. Otherwise, as you well know... these words, I would never... never have said any of them to you."

When he finished his speech, there was not a dry eye among all who heard it. Even the Empress Dowager's heart felt distressed and she came to the side of the bed and gently comforted Su Yi, saying: "Good child, don't let yourself think about only the worst outcomes. Zi Liu might have failed, but my Imperial Son and I [2] will find other famous doctors for you."

Although she said that, but when she saw that Su Yi's wan face was now as white as paper and that his body had become emaciated after these months as a slave she understood that even if there were famous doctors who could help him, it was clear that they could not reach him in the time that he had left. There was nothing she else she could do at this time but to sigh incessantly in her heart.

There was no way that this fact would escape Su Yi, but he saw that Wanyan Xu already gotten to his feet. He said: "That's right, I will issue a decree immediately... issue a decree seeking out all the famous doctors under Heaven..." Confronted with the sight of this sovereign ruler, erstwhile so powerful and confident but now reduced to such a distraught state, Su Yi really could not bring himself to tell him the truth --- that he was about to leave the mortal realm soon. He could only tug at him and say with a forced smile: "Leave these matters to Zi Nong and the rest, you... you come here and sit with me for a while... could you do that instead?" These were the last moments the two of them would ever have together; he really abhorred the thought of wasting even half a second of this precious time.

Su Yi's gaze now wandered over to Wanyan Shuo and when their eyes met, this little Crown Prince could contain himself no longer and bounded over to Su Yi's side. While crying loudly, he said: "Mother Empress is not allowed to die, I don't allow you

to die. You don't know this but ever since you have been gone, I have been neglecting my studies and I've forgotten much of my lessons. I am waiting for you to supervise me before I will agree to attend to them again, if you don't, I refuse to study ever again. Hu hu hu," He was still a little child, and could only come up with this as a reason to compel Su Yi to stay and not leave him.

Su Yi was also feeling heartsick at the thought of parting; he dearly wished to tell Wanyan Shuo that he also could not bear to leave him. However, if he said such things at a time like this, besides causing even more heartache for the little Crown Prince in future, what else would it accomplish? He thought that this child was indeed pitiable; not only did his birth mother depart this world early, but when he became attached to Su Yi, Su Yi had hurt him instead. And now, he was about to experience being parted from another loved one by death once again. Thinking about all the suffering that he was about to inflict upon this child, and how he was helpless to prevent any of it, he could no longer restrain his tears and they flowed freely from his eyes.

To a person, everybody in the room was laden with grief. At this time, Zi Nan came into the room. She had stayed at the hall to arrange for the dispersal of the disgruntled ministers and could only rejoin them at this time. When she was met with this sombre scene, she hurriedly pulled Zi Liu to the side and made a few enquiries of her. But Zi Liu could only shake her head, unable to speak while she was still weeping uncontrollably. At this, in her heart, Zi Nan immediately knew the score. Therefore, she walked to face Wanyan Xu. After nervously twisting the corner of her clothes for a while, as if throwing caution to the wind, she suddenly said explosively: "Although Zi Liu's skill in medicine is superior to all the Imperial Doctors we have in the palace, but, in fact... in fact there is somebody within the palace whose skill in medicine she cannot match. Young Master's illness might not necessarily be so hopeless in that person's eyes." After she said these words, everybody in the room was both surprised and delighted. Hurriedly, they urged her to explain what she meant in detail.

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However, Zi Nan only looked at the Empress Dowager and Wanyan Xu awkwardly, only when she saw that everyone was about to burst with impatience did she say, with a voice as small as a mosquito's: "Do the Empress Dowager and the Emperor... do you still remember... remember the second... second Prince?"

Before her voice had even faded, the Empress Dowager had already cried out in alarm: "What? The person you were referring to was none other than him? Since when did he become an accomplished physician? It doesn't matter even if he has become a renowned doctor, have you forgotten about the late King's command? It is absolutely forbidden for anybody in the palace to mention him." As she was speaking, this voice of this Empress Dowager, who usually had impeccable manners and was calm, had begun to turn sharp and severe. At this turn of events, Zi Nan became too scared to speak again.

Wanyan Xu was also taken aback, but at such a time, he did not care an iota about such things. As long as he could save Su Yi, it didn't matter who he was. Thus, he quickly asked again: "Zi Nan, you said that he... he can cure Su Su..."

Before he could finish, the Empress Dowager interrupted with a harsh voice: "So what if he can cure him, don't tell me you still wish to summon him here? It can't be that you have forgotten your Royal Father's command, or forgotten that he is... he is the shame of our Jin Liao Imperial Family? Your Royal Father was already being merciful when he did not kill him on that day, I [1] forbid you to call him over here."

Wanyan Xu had always shown filial piety and obedience to the Empress Dowager but at this moment he looked straight at her and said gravely: "Mother Empress, if your child the one who is on the verge of death today, will you also refuse to let him come here to save your child?"

The Empress Dowager's face turned white and she said angrily: "What nonsense are you talking about? There is no reason at all to make such an supposition, I do not wish to bother with you now. In any case, you are not allowed to send for that

person.” So saying, she turned and was about to leave, but she suddenly felt her sleeve being tugged. Looking down, she saw that it was none other than Wanyan Shuo. At this time, the little Crown Prince was crying so much that he found it difficult to speak without choking. He pleaded: “Imperial Grandma, let that person come and save Mother Empress.” She was both vexed and flustered, but then she saw that her son had headed straight back to Su Yi's side. Holding his hand tightly, he enunciated each word clearly as he said: “Mother Empress, it's not a supposition, if Su Su leaves the world of mortals and it's sea of bitterness behind, your child will definitely go with him. You can say that your child is being wilful, or even that he is cowardly. Su Su... he is my [2] life”

Complex emotions were swirling in the Empress Dowager's eyes as she watched her son; with the cold and unfeeling nature that he had exhibited all throughout his life, she had never expected that in the end, even he could not escape the machinations of that word "love". Just as she was about to harden her heart and say something callous, suddenly, she saw that her grandson had rushed to Wanyan Xu's side and leaning into Su Yi's arms, he cried out: “Imperial Grandma, Imperial Father and Mother Empress are the people who your grandson loves the most, if they are gone, your grandson also does not wish to live anymore. If we can travel the road to Hades together as a family, it will not be so lonely.”

This grandson was the light of the Empress Dowager's life and when she heard his words, she couldn't help but to turn pale with fright as if her heart was being gouged out. She quickly said: “Shuo Er, don't say things like that, let Imperial Grandma think for a bit.” So saying, she turned to Wanyan Xu and said: “Even if I should agree to this today, but he... he has long considered us to be his enemies, how would he be willing to come and treat your beloved? I'm afraid that he would be happier to watch General Su die and to see you become so grieved that you wish for your own death.”

Wanyan Xu was elated upon hearing that and he said: “As long as Mother Empress agrees, I'm glad. Since he has not been asked, how can we say for sure that he will refuse to come?” Then, he looked at Zi Nan and said: “Zi Nan and Zi Liu, go to Xia Er's residence and relay to him my verbal decree. Ask him to come here and treat Su Su, if he can successfully bring Su Su to safety from this peril, I will agree to any

demands he wishes to make.” Zi Nan and Zi Liu answered in the affirmative and left to summon Wanyan Xia.

At this, both Wanyan Shuo and Zi Nong turned from grief to happiness, and Wanyan Xu returned to Su Yi's bedside, saying to him joyfully: “Su Su, did you hear that? There is someone who can save you.” In excitement, he set about straightening Su Yi's dishevelled hair as he said with deep love: “Su Su, don't worry, when you have recovered, I will never let you suffer again. Because I am seated on the Dragon Throne, my heart is full of assorted considerations, but I almost sacrificed your life. I do not wish to defy my own heart's desires anymore, just this once, I will do exactly as I wish. When posterity judges me, even if there are people who would say that I was an incapable ruler, I will accept it. As long as I can be with you, I will accept any criticism levelled at me.”

At the side, Zi Nong smiled and said: “Your Majesty, as long as the track record of your accomplishments is presented, there is no way that the annals of history will claim that you are an incapable ruler just because you pardoned your Empress.” She looked at Su Yi and said: “Young Master, what do you say to that? His Majesty is so good to you, does your heart feel happy to see that too?”

Su Yi gave a drawn-out sigh in his heart, thinking of those literati, thinking to himself that in the end, he was still unable to save them. Seeing that Wanyan Xu was so deeply devoted to him, if Su Yi really recovered from his bout with illness, how could he bring himself to harden his heart and hurt him once again? At this thought, he felt like there were two people who had grabbed hold of his heart and were pulling it in different directions. The pain was unbearable and he spit out another large mouthful of blood which immediately caused Wanyan Xu and the rest to return to a state of panic.

Zi Yan gave a sigh, approaching Su Yi's she personally wiped away the blood stains on him. As she did so, she said: “Young Master, the most important thing for you to do now is focus on recuperating. Don't think too much about other things. As the saying goes, the reformation of a prodigal son is worth more than gold. As long as you assist the Emperor loyally after you have recovered, who else in the world could

be more blessed than you?"

Almost in disbelief, Su Yi raised his head to look at her. Obviously, this woman had used a play on words [3] in her speech, hinting to Su Yi that she had the notion of going back on her original intentions, but the condition was that Su Yi must be true to Wanyan Xu in future and support him in his rule. There was a burst of agitation in his heart; forcing himself to contain his ecstasy, he made like her and couching his true meaning behind innocuous words, he asked: "Miss's words are apt, don't tell me that Miss knows [4] of my troubles? This is indeed remarkable."

Zi Yan raised her head and said with a smile: "Young Master, you can rest easy and concentrate on your recovery. Zi Yan has given you much cause for offence in the past, I hope that Young Master will be able to forgive me." When Su Yi heard her say that he could rest easy, he knew that she had a way of saving those members of the intelligentsia. The bliss that her words brought to him was so immense that he found it impossible to describe. As for Wanyan Xu and the rest of the bystanders, they only took the exchange to mean that Zi Yan had finally relented on her hard stance on Su Yi and would no longer oppose him as Empress, but this knowledge also pleased them greatly.

As the Empress Dowager observed all of this from the side, she could only secretly sigh and thought to herself: *Aii, General Su wins over hearts so easily, it is indeed a rare quality. He is worthy of my making an exception and letting that person come over here to treat him.* Looking out the window at the night sky, she saw that fireworks were being released, and they were brightening up the sky with their brilliant colours. Distant "pi pa" sounds could be heard in the room and she said to herself: "Great King, it's not that I wish to go against the wishes of the deceased, but in these circumstances I cannot do otherwise. I have only have done this as a last resort."

As she was thinking over what had happened, suddenly the curtains over the door were stirred. Zi Nan and Zi Liu had returned, and both of them wore a look of dejection on their faces. Also, there was nobody following behind them. The

Empress Dowager's expression changed, and she said in a grim voice: "How did it go? Did he refuse to come?"

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Zi Nan nodded her head, the expression on her face was terrible to look at and she said in a tragic voice: "Second... Second Prince... once he heard that it was the Emperor who was summoning him to treat the Empress... he immediately... immediately rejected the request in the next breath, and refused to allow your humble servants to say even half a sentence more." So saying, she hung her head, feeling very ashamed of her failure.

The Empress Dowager gave a cold laugh and said: "Rejected in the next breath? How could it be so simple? The two of you were gone for so long, you must have pleaded long and hard with him and also, you must have endured a lot of blasphemous words from him. As I [1] have said before, he views the lot of us as his enemies, there is no way he would be willing to come forth and treat General Su."

In an instant, everybody in the house fell into silence again and the ambiance of the room once again became shrouded with despair. Suddenly, they saw that Wanyan Xu had stood up, and he said to Su Yi gently: "Su Su, be at ease and stay here to recuperate, I [2] shall be right back."

Su Yi clutched at Wanyan Xu to restrain him and with a bitter laugh, he said: "Wanyan Xu, do you think you can keep me in the dark? I know that you want to go and beg that Second Prince, are you afraid that I won't allow you to go and suffer humiliation at his hands? You really... really know me well, you... in my eyes you... are a hero with an indomitable spirit... even if I have to die... I'll never let you go and have to endure... endure humiliation at the hands of others. Moreover... this illness... this illness has nearly run its course, even if that Prince is a deity among physicians... I suspect that he would also be unable to cure me, so what's the point of going there?" Really, his body had already been depleted of all its vitality, therefore although the words he said were steeped in sincere feelings and

passionate conviction, he could not say them smoothly and had to stop and marshal up his energy at intervals.

Wanyan Xu forced a smile and said: "Su Su, don't worry so much. I am the Great King of Jin Liao, who would dare to vent their anger on me?" So saying, he gently but firmly dislodged Su Yi's hand from himself, turning his body away resolutely, he proceeded to leave with his head held high with Zi Liu and Zi Nan following behind. The Empress Dowager saw that there was a single-mindedness in her son's eyes that she had never seen before and knew that his mind had been made-up. Even if she were to counsel him ten-thousand times, he would remain implacable. Unable to contain her distress, she cried out loudly: "Oh Great King, when all is said and done, what did we actually do wrong? Why are we reduced to having to beg him today? Even if we had wronged him, then why is Xu Er the one who has to bear the consequences?" She then started to weep. Upon witnessing this scene, Su Yi's heart became even heavier and more than ever, Zi Yan felt that her heart was being fried in oil, never did she expect that her ill-considered actions on that fateful day would eventually create such a difficult situation for her master today.

Going back to Wanyan Xu, accompanied by Zi Liu and Zi Nan, he was now near the residence of Wanyan Xia that was situated by the side of the North Lake. Zi Liu did not wish for her master to suffer humiliation for naught, and therefore, she asked Zi Nan: "Is your information accurate? How did you come to know that he's a deity among physicians? Don't let it happen that our King would return in disappointment after making the trip here."

Zi Nan said: "What I said is absolutely true. I only came to know about this matter not long ago. The Second Prince had a serving girl who had been attending to him for many years. Remember that recently, the number of palace maids on staff was reduced? His serving girl's parents are old and live far away, because they have no other children, I decided to do her a small favour since it came at no cost to myself and I released her from palace service. But who would have predicted that this servant is deeply attached to her master and she could not quite bring herself to leave. So I promised that if she wanted to come back and visit the Second Prince in future, she just needed to find me and I would arrange it for her. She was very

grateful and in the course of our conversation, she mentioned that she had originally been afflicted with tuberculosis and it was the Second Prince who had cured her of it. There was once she vomited half a pail of blood and thought that she was going to die without ever seeing her father and mother ever again, but unexpectedly, the Second Prince brought her back from the brink of death. That's how I came to know that he was actually in possession of such an exceptional ability. Otherwise, how would I dare to say something like that?"

Before Zi Liu could respond, Wanyan Xu already said with great joy: "Half a pail of blood... if that's the case, Su Su can surely be saved." Zi Liu gave a sigh and said: "Master, have a care and don't rejoice too soon. The Second Prince hates the Empress Dowager and you as if you were his sworn enemies. Even if we are able to enlist his aid in saving Young Master's life, I'm afraid that you will not escape his wrath lightly."

But Wanyan Xu only said: "Doesn't matter, doesn't matter. As long as he is willing to save Su Su, even if he wants me to ingest a slow-acting poison, I will be resigned to it." As they were speaking, they reached the side of the North Lake. By this time, the sky was showing the first glimmer of dawn, the faint light illuminating the lonely little house that was built there.

Zi Liu went up and knocked on the door, saying in a loud voice: "The Emperor has arrived. Prepare..." Before she could finish, she had been cut off by Wanyan Xu. He smiled bitterly and said: "We have come here today to beg him, if I still put on airs and graces and insist on my prerogatives as the Emperor, will it not just stoke his anger?" For the sake of saving the one he loved, this enamoured Emperor was actually willing to abandon the great authority he held as the supreme ruler of all under Heaven.

After a good long while, the door creaked open with a "zhi ya" sound and an elegant face looked out at them. When the owner of that face saw that it was Zi Liu and Zi Nan, he gave a yawn and said: "Oh, it's the two of you again. Don't tell me that you are still unwilling to give up? Oh yes, which one of you just shouted out something? Emperor something, did the Emperor come here?" With that said, he turned his gaze

towards Wanyan Xu, after eyeballing him from top to bottom for a while, he said: "Sorry, I don't know you. If you are the Emperor, in theory I should call you my elder brother, but in reality the two of us don't share even the slightest bit of consanguinity. Do we, Emperor? Wanyan... oh, it's been too long, I have forgotten your name. But for the Emperor to deign to grace this little prison where I am being held captive with his exalted presence, there must be an important matter at hand. Is it that you all have been dwelling on this for more than twenty-nine years, and the more you think, the more you feel that you cannot suffer that I, the shame of your Imperial Family, should continue to exist in this world and now you have come to kill me?" His words poured out like water from a burst dam and he did not give anybody else any chance to interrupt him. His words were full of resentment and lugubriousness; in both speech and manner, he was far removed from the Prince who Su Yi had encountered previously, who had such a dispassionate and refined bearing. As he said the last sentence, he pulled the door wide open and after straightening the old clothes he was wearing, he said blandly: "That being the case, I'll let you have my little life."

Wanyan Xu looked at him, this so-called younger brother who had been born as the result of his Mother Concubine's adulterous affair with another man. Thus, he had always been considered to be the shame of the Jin Liao Royal Family. Although the two of them were ostensibly brothers, they were not related by blood at all. Now that Wanyan Xu saw him, he could see that he was hiding his grief and indignation behind a calm facade that was as placid as water. In his own heart, he began to feel some disgust at the way Wanyan Xia had been treated, thinking to himself: in the end, he was also an innocent party. Ever since he had met Su Yi, he had been influenced by him and was no longer as overbearing as he used to be. Among other things, he had learned how to be sympathetic to others.

But at this point, he could only sigh and say: "That's right, I am the Emperor. I have come because the Empress is seriously ill, the Imperial Physician and Zi Liu have run out of options in fighting the disease. I have heard that my worthy little brother is a surpassing physician and have come specially to request his aid in the hopes that he can put to use the miraculous hands of a healer he possesses and bring the Empress back from the brink of death." His words were almost pleading, and

harboured no traces of imperial pretension but Wanyan Xia only continued to stare at him coldly and inscrutably, so that none of them could guess what he had to say.

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Zi Liu, Zi Nan and Wanyan Xu were all on edge as they looked at him. After waiting for what felt like half a day, finally they saw him give a mocking laugh and say: “Worthy little brother, hahaha, I am going to laugh myself to death. That an object of shame such as I can become the Emperor's worthy little brother, where do I begin to start enumerating how ridiculous this is?”

Zi Li stepped forward and said: “Second Prince, His Majesty has come in person just to beseech you which demonstrates his sincerity. As the saying goes, healers should care for their patients like their own children, on account of His Majesty's steadfastness in love, I hope that you will consent to aid us in saving the Empress.”

Wanyan Xia gave a “humph”, looking at Wanyan Xu, he said: “So one should be rewarded just for steadfastness in love? My parents were steadfast in love too, all those years ago, but who could have predicted that my mother would end up being sent as tribute to the King of Jin Liao? The two of them were parted by mountains and rivers, but my father was undaunted by the ten-thousands of miles that separated them and made his way to Jin Liao and infiltrated the palace so as to reunite with her. But in the end, what did they reap? Ultimately, the pair of star-crossed lovers was still ordered to commit suicide, do you people think that I do not know of it? I was spared only because you wished for me to live out my life in unrelenting pain, so that my father and mother cannot be at peace even in the netherworld. And now you have the gall to mention steadfastness in love to my face? My parents are dead, and I am unable to think of a way to avenge them, but it seems that Heaven has taken pity on me. Now, you also have to endure being parted from your loved one, hahaha, how could there be a more satisfying way for me to have my vengeance?”

Wanyan Xu was silent, it would seem that the Empress Dowager's words had been

proven right, Wanyan Xia did indeed bear a deep-seated hatred for him and Wanyan Xu was afraid that he would only be too happy if Su Yi died. Wanyan Xu could only assume a deferential manner and say humbly: "Worthy little brother, what happened to your parents is indeed a tragedy, but it has already occurred and nothing can be done about it. Do you really have the heart to look on as the same type of tragedy is re-enacted? I'm afraid that in her afterlife if Her Ladyship Concubine Hua comes to learn that her son has grown up to be so callous, she will also..."

Before he could finish, Wanyan Xia coldly interrupted: "There's no need for you to say anymore. I said I won't save him, and I meant it. Today is the first day of the New Year, the shops selling coffins are probably all closed. My advice to you is that you should order somebody to go and source a suitable coffin and make preparations to give your lover a good funeral. Haha, there has not been the need to make funerary arrangements for a long time within our palace, is that not so?" He concluded his speech viciously and turned to leave but he suddenly heard Wanyan Xu say loudly: "Stop right there."

Wanyan Xia slowly turned his body around to face them, articulating each word clearly, he said: "You can use me as a sacrifice at your Empress's funeral but it is impossible for you to compel me to lift a finger to save your Empress." Behind his simple but firm words, there was endless enmity.

No matter what, saving Su Su was the most important thing. Wanyan Xu gulped a few times, swallowing all the anxiety and ire that threatened to erupt out of him and said: "If you have any conditions, you can state them freely. As long as you can save Su Su, I can agree to any of your demands."

"No need for that, what I need the most is to see the lot of you suffering." After Wanyan Xia said that, he made to go back into the house, but he abruptly halted his steps and turned back, as if he had suddenly thought of something. With the hint of a sneer playing at the corners of his mouth, he said: "Big Brother Wanyan, are your feelings for that Empress of yours really as deep as the ocean? For her [2] sake, are you willing to kneel down and beg me?" He had barely finished speaking when Zi Nan and Zi Liu --- both greatly outraged --- rebuked him: "What audacity!"

Wanyan Xu waved a hand at them to prevent them from speaking further and said in a grave tone: "Xia Er, if I am willing to kneel down in front of you, will you then be willing to go and save the Empress?" Without hesitation, he gave voice to the most pressing thought in his mind. Zi Nan and Zi Liu said urgently: "Your Majesty must not, as the most honoured Son of Heaven..." Once again, Wanyan Xu stopped them from finishing their speech. Staring fixatedly at Wanyan Xia, he said unequivocally: "Tell me, if I kneel, will you go save the Empress?"

Wanyan Xia was stunned for a moment; he had never expected to hear an answer in that vein. A fleeting look of astonishment danced across his face before he gave a cold laugh and said: "No, I will not promise you anything. But Big Brother Wanyan, if you are really willing to kneel down for the sake of your Empress, there is a possibility that I might change my mind. Of course, I cannot say for certain how long you might need to kneel before I might relent."

As soon as his voice faded, he saw that Wanyan Xu had bent his knees and knelt down without any hesitation at all. A faint clap of thunder could be heard coming from the horizon, snowflakes that were reminiscent of goose feathers floated and swirled down from the Heavens, falling onto the body that was kneeling firmly in the snow like an embedded javelin.

Zi Nan and Zi Liu were as dumbstruck as wooden chickens as they gazed, transfixed, upon their Master. They looked on at their Emperor who was kneeling down resolutely in the snow. Wanyan Xia also looked on in stupefaction, for a long time, his face wore an expression of surprise that he was unable to expunge. Only after expending some conscious effort, was the contrary Prince able to force an icy sneer and say: "In that case, you should carry on kneeling here." So saying, he turned and went into the house.

With a bang, the wooden doors closed behind him heavily. Only at this juncture did Zi Nan and Zi Liu recover their wits. Crying they said: "Your Majesty... how could you... oh, you are the Emperor... you are to be above all others..."

“Zi Liu, hurry back to the Garden of Merriment and attend to Su Su, find some way to rein in his illness, do not let it deteriorate further. Although Xia Er may hate me, I can tell that he is actually a good and kind-hearted person. His anger will abate if I kneel for long enough and he will definitely save Su Su then.” Wanyan Xu cut in as his trusted aides were protesting, and gave his command calmly. Actually he had said the last two lines solely for their benefit, wishing to offer them some comfort in light of their distress. He really did not have the slightest idea whether Wanyan Xia would ultimately go and save a life or not, but as long as there was a glimmer of hope, he would never give up. “Zi Liu, go now. Don’t let the Empress Dowager and Su Su know what I am doing. So as not to rouse their suspicions, Zi Nan, you will stay here with me.”

As he watched Zi Liu's figure sprint away, Wanyan Xu could not help but to close his eyes, putting his hands together, he prayed earnestly: “Heaven, I beg of you to bless Su Su, so that he can hold on long enough for Xia Er to treat him after Xia Er's heart has softened. Su Su he... he has already suffered too much. If there is still more suffering for him in store for him in his future, I beg that you transfer all the trials he must endure to me, let me endure them on his behalf.” He then heaved a long sigh. Although his person was still kneeling at the same spot, his heart had long ago flown to the Empress’s bedroom in the Garden of Merriment

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It was already high noon. Wanyan Xia stared at the dishes of exquisite food laid out on the table for his mid-day repast but he did not feel even the slightest desire to employ his chopsticks and partake of the meal. Instead, his gaze drifted over to the window, and he saw that that person was still kneeling in the snow. A thick layer of snow had already accumulated over his body, but he still kept his waist ram-rod straight as he balanced upon his knees, just as if he was giving expression to his determination to never give up.

“Just what kind of person is that Empress? What kind of person could inspire him to make such sacrifices?” Wanyan Xia gave a light sigh. He, who had craved for the

warmth of familial love ever since his childhood but had ultimately been unable to obtain even a scrap of it, could not understand how this older brother, who had always appeared to be as dominant and proud as the suzerains [1] of yore, would be willing to kneel down in front of him for the sake of his beloved. Did he forget his own status as the Emperor, and at the same time, had he also forgotten that Wanyan Xia was the greatest shame of the Jin Liao Royal Family, whose very origins had to be kept a secret from the populace for all eternity?

His servant girl approached timidly. Although she knew that her Master's current mood was extremely agitated, she could not contain herself and said: "Your Highness should stop engaging the Emperor in a battle of wills; he is the Emperor after all."

Wanyan Xia only glared at her and said: "What's there to be scared of? He now has a favour to ask of me, even if he hates me so much that his teeth itch at the mere thought of me, at the very least, he has to wait until I have cured that fortunate Empress of his before he can kill me." His eyes were drawn to the scene outside the window again and the feeling of upset in his heart grew stronger. Unable to help himself, he gave a cold "humph" and said: "That Empress has already obtained a love that transcends boundaries. What then, is death?"

Lifting up the cup of wine on the table, he downed it in one gulp. The man who had been as cold as ice and frost in front of Wanyan Xu now had tears clinging to his eyelashes. Waving a hand to dismiss his servant girl, he finally allowed himself to lean over the table and have a good cry. "All of you are only concerned with getting me to save someone, but in these twenty-odd years has the thought ever occurred to any of you whether there was anybody who would come and save me? All of you only know that I am highly skilled in the medical arts, but do any of you know how I came by my skills? The palace maids that looked after me during my childhood were only concerned with making sure that I got enough to eat and drink but they took no notice of me otherwise. It's been so many years that I spent without any companionship. The only means I had of allaying my loneliness was to study the houseful of medical texts that my Mother Concubine left behind. Do you know that the very sight of medical texts makes me retch now? Do you know that when I get

bored now, I will practice my acupuncture techniques on myself, and to test my medicines I came close to losing my life several times? Do any of you know this?"

Since his emotions were already hopelessly in flux, he decided that he might as well indulge himself. Lifting up the jug of wine on the table, he emptied its contents in large gulps before standing up and dashing outside. He shouted: "Wanyan Xu, since you are willing to kneel, then continue kneeling. It's a rare wind that brings you here to see me today, so let this little brother have a chance to take a few more looks at his older brother lest I don't recognise you if we should meet again in future."

Having knelt in the snow for such a long time, Wanyan Xu had already lost most of the sensation in his legs, but he still stubbornly refused to give up. At Wanyan Xia's sudden shout, he couldn't but to exchange a look of surprise with Zi Nan --- Wanyan Xia's voice had sounded teary. A flame of hope was ignited in his heart and he strained his ears to listen intently for any further development but within that wooden hut, all had returned to silence. The little flame of hope also died out completely, as if it had been submerged in water and he couldn't help but to reveal his disappointment by the expression he wore.

Zi Nan really couldn't stand to watch this scene any longer. With her hand, she touched her Master's leg, to find that it had already become as cold as a block of ice. Wanyan Xu was afraid of infuriating Wanyan Xia and thus, had refused the use of a mat as a means of cushioning his knees. In his haste to come here, he had neglected to put on heavier clothing. At this time, the weather was cold, and the ground was frozen. Although Zi Nan had on a warm cloak, he had nothing to ward off the chill, hoping that the saying 'sincerity splits open gold and stone' would come true. Perhaps Wanyan Xia would be touched by his sincerity and demonstrate great mercy by going to save Su Yi. Even if it meant that he would have to endure even more bitter suffering, what did it matter?

"Master, don't kneel any longer, if you keep on kneeling, both of your legs would surely become disabled." Zi Nan was so distressed that she was crying --- Wanyan Xu was the ruler of the nine-five [2], if his legs were really to become crippled, it would be a calamity akin to Heaven collapsing and Earth caving in. Feeling

increasingly desperate, she threw caution to the wind and was about to pull Wanyan Xu to his feet, only for Wanyan Xu to throw her a glare and say in a stern voice: "Let go, I [3] order you to let go of me."

Zi Nan was both anxious and afraid, not daring to defy his orders, her tears began to flow even faster. Like beads on a broken string, they poured down her face. Wanyan Xu gave her a glance and in a softer tone, he said: "This is nothing to cry over, Zi Nan, do you still remember Su Su's leg? I was the one who gave the orders for his flogging, his leg was broken because of me. Every time I see him walking with that limping gait, my heart would be consumed with pain that is so severe that I cannot describe it with language. Every day, I have prayed to Heaven, asking that I be allowed to bear part of his suffering. If the ruin of my two legs could exchange for Su Su's life, could exchange for him not to have to endure any more torment for the rest of his life, then I will pay that price with no hesitation or regrets." He looked at his favoured servant again and said clearly: "I am doing this willingly."

Zi Nan choked back her sobs and nodded, the feeling in her heart growing more uncomfortable by the second, as if there was an obstruction in one of the arteries. Suddenly, she burst through the wooden doors, knelt down and cried out: "Second Prince, please have mercy. If His Majesty continues to kneel, his legs will really become crippled. I beg of you, please have mercy." So saying, she began to knock her head on the ground, kowtowing as if she had gone mad. Wanyan Xu shouted at her to stop, but she ignored him.

Suddenly, Wanyan Xia walked out, with a voice that had regained its original coldness, he said: "Get up, if you carry on wailing, I will immediately decide against going to treat your Empress." So saying, he looked at Wanyan Xu and while wearing a chilling smile, he said: "Let me see how deep your affection for that Empress really is." With that said, he watched as Zi Nan got up with an air of grievance before he re-entered the house. He mused to himself: "His legs are about to become crippled? Seems like he can't keep up this perseverance for much longer. Big Brother Wanyan, I'm waiting to see when you would give up."

The snow grew heavier as time wore on. Wanyan Xia looked on, seemingly

unfeeling, as Wanyan Xu --- still kneeling at the same spot --- became a snowman. His face could be faintly seen only when he gave the occasional tremble, shaking some of the snow off. Wanyan Xia desperately clenched his fists, and gritted his teeth so hard that a grinding sound could be heard, but these measures could not prevent the glacier that his heart had become from slowly melting. That... after all, that was his elder brother, if only in name. Even if he did not acknowledge him as his younger brother, even if they were not related by blood, for someone who had always desired familial affection like himself, he could not help but give in to the impulse of taking Wanyan Xu to be his own kin and elder brother.

“Your Majesty, the sun is about to set, the Second Prince’s heart will not soften. He will not save Young Master.” Zi Nan had cried so much that her tears were running dry, but no matter what she said, Wanyan Xu stubbornly refused to get up. As if his life depended on it, he struggled to keep his body upright. There was only one thought in his heart: *This is... Su Su’s last hope. No matter what, I can’t give up.*

Finally, the wooden doors opened again to reveal Wanyan Xia, who had been fully restored to his usual aloof and arrogant appearance. Holding a small box in his hands, he walked to Wanyan Xu and said in a cold voice: “I don’t know where your Empress lives. If you can still stand up and walk, then lead the way.”

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The effect of this single sentence was like clouds parting to reveal a bright full moon or the snows melting with the advent of spring. Wanyan Xu had become so frozen that he had lost almost all sensation in his face, but even so, a stiff rictus of ecstasy formed on his face, making him look extremely weird. In great excitement, he stood up but with a "pu tong" sound, he sank back down into a kneel. The pain in his knees was akin to having countless silver needles piercing the flesh of that area. Both numb and pained, that singular feeling was beyond his ability to describe. With Zi Nan supporting him, he managed to slowly regain his feet, but once again, his body sank down and he fell heavily onto the frozen ground.

At this, Zi Nan became so scared that her flower-like face lost its colour. Although she was not learned in the field of medicine, she understood that Wanyan Xu was unlikely to retain function in his legs. In panic, she hurriedly tried to help him up again, only to see that Wanyan Xu appeared to be even more terrified than she was. Leaning on her arm, he tried to struggle up as if his life depended on it.

Wanyan Xia gave a cold laugh and said: "What? Are you afraid now? Afraid that your legs will become disabled? Why then, did you put on an attitude of 'love is more immutable than gold' and kneel for the whole day? I can tell you right now, I will not feel guilty, I did not beg you to kneel to me after all." Just as he finished speaking, Wanyan Xu, suppressing his anger and putting on a smile, said: "I [1] know, I can still walk, let us go now." So saying, he braced his body with a monumental effort and managed to stand up.

Zi Nan could tolerate it no more and shouted loudly at Wanyan Xia: "Second Prince, you can't seem to understand, His Majesty is... His Majesty is afraid that if he delays in showing you the way, you will refuse to treat Young Master, you... do you really think that he's concerned about his legs?" She tearfully rebuked Wanyan Xia; at once, he froze on the spot, stumped. Wanyan Xu was afraid that he would be shamed into reacting with anger and quickly gave Zi Nan a few admonishments before turning back to Wanyan Xia, saying with a smile: "Oh, worthy little brother... there's no need to pay any mind to this girl's... nonsensical words, I... will lecture her when we get back. It's all my fault, I have indulged them too much." Hope had been written all over his face, and at this juncture, it even revealed a hint of entreaty. For Su Yi's sake, this powerful conqueror who had single-handedly forged a mighty nation had just about abandoned all ego.

Wanyan Xia scrutinised him for a moment before giving a soft sigh. He retrieved a small bottle of medicine from the front of his robes, after pouring some of the ointment it contained into his hands, he walked to Wanyan Xu and applied it to his knees. He said blandly: "A moment's delay would not affect the situation; we can have a rest before we go. Don't worry, I have another reason for going to save your Empress. I have now become very curious as to what type of person would be worthy of being treated with such whole-hearted devotion by you." As he said the last

line, his usually dispassionate face unconsciously revealed a trace of loneliness.

Wanyan Xu's felt a pang in his heart, suddenly he felt that this little brother, who he had felt was insufferably arrogant, was actually quite pitiful. Upon reflection, he really had nothing to do with his parents' crime. Turning his head to look back at the lonely little wooden house, so removed from the rest of the palace, he thought: *There's is no need to treat him like this in future. Twenty years of a solitary life must have been difficult to endure.*

As he was meditating on these thoughts, he began to feel threads of warmth begin to slowly seep through his trousers, penetrating right to his bone marrow, producing a tingling feeling that was indescribably comfortable. At once, the chills and agony in the vicinity of his knees disappeared without a trace. Shocked by the sudden improvement, he tried moving around, to find that he could now stand up effortlessly, as if the day he had spent kneeling in the snow was nothing but a dream. At this, he rejoiced even more and said: "To think that worthy little brother possesses such skills, Su Su... Su Su will definitely be saved." So saying, he was overwhelmed with emotion. Unable to contain himself any longer, he actually did not care about maintaining his image and allowed his tears to fall as he choked on his emotions.

The cold rage which had manifested itself in his glacial eyes having been spent, Wanyan Xia now looked at Wanyan Xu evenly. He gave a "humph" and said: "Isn't it a bit too premature to be crying tears of joy." So saying, he went ahead and started to walk away. Embarrassed, Wanyan Xu wiped away his tears before hurrying forward to lead the way.

Going back to the Garden of Merriment, Su Yi could not continue to lie down any longer. Between spitting up mouthfuls of blood, he had fallen unconscious a few more times. When he opened his eyes, he saw that it was getting late in the day but Wanyan Xu had still not returned. When he thought of how Wanyan Xu must be enduring untold humiliation at the hands of the Second Prince, all for Su Yi's sake, his heart felt like it was being fried in oil over a fire. He couldn't stand it anymore. After struggling to sit up in the bed, he had to stop and pant for breath before he said in a weak voice: "Zi Nong, help... help me over to that... Second Prince's..."

residence, I... I cannot let him suffer humiliation for me anymore... I... I cannot again let him... He... because of me he has... already... suffered too much.” So saying, he started to struggle out of the bed. Zi Nong hurried over to restrain him, crying out: “Young Master, if you know of His Majesty’s pains, then you should put all your energies into recovering from your illness. He has made such a great sacrifice, but it was for you. If you disregard that and leave anyway, you... do you wish to have his life?”

Wanyan Shuo couldn't stop staring at Su Yi. The boy had a temperament that was as staunch as iron, and in his heart he thought: *Mother Empress's condition has already reached this stage, and who knows what sort of difficulties Imperial Father is being put through right now. Even if that physician possesses surpassing ability in the healing arts, does he have the power to reverse the will of Heaven? Wouldn't it be better to let Mother Empress and Imperial Father be together; nobody would have to suffer any more grievances, we can travel the path to the underworld as a family and in the next life, we can be reincarnated to become a real family.* He was still a small child; naturally his thought processes were still somewhat deficient in maturity. But because he still held on to a faint glimmer of hope, he did not give voice to his morbid thoughts as he supported Su Yi's body.

Zi Nong saw that he could not be dissuaded and also that Su Yi's condition had deteriorated still further because of worry over Wanyan Xu. Even though Zi Liu had also joined her in advising Su Yi against making such an injurious move, they were helpless in the face of this crisis.

As they were getting ever more anxious, suddenly the Empress Dowager admonished: “Quiet down, all of you.” After that, she turned towards Su Yi and said: “Do you think that I [2] don't know that Imperial Son is in very difficult straits now? But he is doing it willingly for you and since he is being driven by his feelings, it is useless to try and stop him. Moreover, by this time he has already spent half the day on this quest, there is no logic in giving up halfway at this point. I want you to lie down and concentrate on recovering. Don't let it happen that after he successfully begs that person to come here by suffering untold hardships, he comes back to find that you cannot hold on anymore. Lie down.”

The Empress Dowager usually carried herself with grace and elegance, but who knew that once she demonstrated her displeasure, even Su Yi would be shamed into feeling guilty. Also, he knew that there was logic behind her words, therefore he could only lie down again. Only, how could he possibly calm his heart and mind? His bloodless lips were blood-stained because he could not stop biting them in his anxiety. Just as he was at his wits end, he suddenly heard a high-pitched voice call out in a sing-song: "The Emperor has arrived."

As the sound of that voice faded, Wanyan Xu, Wanyan Xia and Zi Nan walked into the room, and everybody was exceptionally delighted at the sight of them. Su Yi felt even more moved, and with his pair of beautiful eyes, he cared only to look at Wanyan Xu. Within a split second, his gaze expressed a thousand types of gratitude and ten-thousand forms of tenderness. As he was luxuriating silently in his feelings of love, he suddenly heard a surprised exclamation: "Oh, so you are the Empress?" He turned his head in that direction and was also summarily startled at the sight that met his eyes.

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Although Su Yi had speculated on whether this Second Prince with the surpassing medical skills that they were speaking of was none other than the Prince he had encountered before while Zi Nong and the rest were discussing the matter, but when he actually saw Wanyan Xia, he was still taken aback. On the other hand, Wanyan Xia regained his equilibrium in the time it took to blink. Looking at Su Yi, he frowned and said: "So you are the Empress? I instructed you to watch your diet previously, so how did you still manage to land yourself into this state because of your eating habits? Although your previous condition was serious, it was still not life-threatening; it was nothing compared to now." He went up to Su Yi, and read his pulse. After a long time, he sighed and said to Wanyan Xu: "I know that your deep love for him is genuine. Since that is so, how did you come to let your Empress serve in the laundry service when banishment to the Cold Palace [1] should have been the heaviest punishment? What could make you hate him enough to punish him like that, and yet

still care enough to beg me to save his life today?”

Wanyan Xu said: “About that... Aii, it’s hard to explain in a few words. Hopefully worthy little brother will use your miraculous hands of a healer and save his life. As for the answers to your questions, I [2] will tell you at a later date.”

Wanyan Xia gave a cold laugh, thinking in his heart: *Later Date? Presently, I am the only living being under Heaven who has received a kneel from you, will I live to see a later date?* However he did not give voice to these thoughts, instead he opened the little box that he had brought with him. Taking out a small porcelain bottle, he poured out two pills and fed them to Su Yi. After that, he went to a table in the room outside of the bedchamber and wrote out a prescription and ordered people to brew the medicine and bring it to him. Going back into the bedchamber, he said to Su Yi: “Even if you are maddened by hunger, you are not to consume any food or water. I have to determine exactly how far the disease has progressed before proceeding further.”

Everybody in the room watched Su Yi curiously, not believing that after Zi Liu had administered medicines and applied needles to Su Yi to no avail, his disease could be controlled with two small pills. For Su Yi to maintain consciousness to this point had not been easy; after he had consumed the two pills, he felt drowsiness overtaking his body. With both of his hands were clasped in Wanyan XU's large ones, he felt incomparably comfortable and warm. Unable to hold out any longer, after giving two yawns, he fell into a deep sleep.

Wanyan Xu received from Zi Nong the warm wet towel she had prepared and wiped away the cold sweat that had gathered on Su Yi's brow. Standing to the side, Wanyan Xia observed his careful and tender actions silently, before suddenly saying: “It would seem that he is also very much attached to you. Judging by his condition, he would not have been able to hold on for so long otherwise. Now we have to see if his internal bleeding can be stemmed. Only if the bleeding stops, will it be possible for the disease to be cured.”

He added: “I have met him once before, it was on an afternoon during late autumn.

At that time the disease was not very serious, or at least, it should not have progressed to this stage at such a rapid pace. I also specifically warned him that he needed to watch his diet. But from what I observe now, he has obviously endured long-term malnutrition and the food that he did eat was too rough. That is the only reason that the disease could have progressed to this stage within such a short period of time. As far as I know, even for slaves, their diet should not be this poor and meagre and they should not be lacking food and warm clothes. Take me, for example. Even though I have been eating these meals [3] for so many years, they have not caused any problems for me.”

As he listened to Wanyan Xia making such statements, Wanyan Xu was drawing a few conclusions of his own in his heart. With a forbidding expression on his face, he gave Zi Nong a few instructions in a low voice. She then left hurriedly. Although Wanyan Xia did not let the expression on his face change, in his heart, he was feeling very pleased with himself. In his heart, he felt that those people of the laundry service were bullies who picked on the weak but feared people more powerful than themselves. They were truly despicable, and now he could finally take revenge on them, courtesy of Su Yi. He knew that Wanyan Xu was by nature cold and unforgiving, if he came to find that someone had really taking the opportunity to surreptitiously abuse Su Yi, he would definitely not let them off lightly. As he thought of this, he couldn't help but to wear a slight smile on his face.

By now, the Empress Dowager had already long since departed for her own palace as she found it hard to be in the same room as Wanyan Xia [4]. The little Crown Prince Wanyan Shuo had been staring intently at Su Yi, his eyes never once leaving that paper-white face but now, he suddenly looked up and gave Wanyan Xia a pleasant smile, before saying: “Uncle [5], after consuming your medicine, will Mother Empress get better?”

Wanyan Xia stared blankly at Wanyan Shuo for a moment. At this time, if it had been Wanyan Xu who had called into question his medical knowledge in this fashion, he would have left with a flick of his sleeves at once. But when he saw Wanyan Shuo smiling at him so sweetly and genuinely, a feeling of warmth suddenly rose up from the bottom of his heart. He couldn't help but to soften his own expression, and said

with a gentle smile: "I guess so, this medicine is specially formulated to treat this very type of disease that causes people to vomit blood. I concocted it from rare herbs that I stole as they were being transported to the Imperial Infirmary."

He now considered himself as one who will undoubtedly be condemned to death, so he did not bother to hide anything. And also this nephew of his, who was his nephew in name only, did not show even a little bit of revulsion for him, just like... just like how he would behave if Wanyan Xia was really his kin uncle. How could this not move him? And so, at this time, his manner actually became amiable and his countenance was pleasant, both of which had hitherto been unseen by any in the room. How could he know that the little devil known as Wanyan Shuo was doing this because he had deduced that Wanyan Xia was the only person who could save Su Yi and so, he had decided that it was prudent to seize the moment and develop a relationship with him so that he will become amenable and continue to give Su Yi medical treatment.

As for Wanyan Xu, at this moment, he did not care about anything else. He only kept staring at Su Yi, deathly afraid that when he next woke up, it would again be with a big mouthful of blood. At this time, the sky was already bright but everybody had been without rest for a long time. Zi Yan hurriedly dispatched the palace maids to have a rest and also, sent for a new complement to replace them. Fortunately, Su Yi had yet to throw up blood again, and everybody could feel slightly more reassured.

Suddenly, they heard a eunuch of the Inner Palace report from beyond the door: "Reporting to Your Majesty, it is time for the morning court. Many ministers are already waiting outside the hall." Wanyan Xu exchanged a glance with Zi Liu, in their hearts both of them understood clearly that the ministers had come to hear the news. If Su Yi was still alive, they fully intended to carry out a so-called "Purge of Evil People around the Emperor [6]".

When he thought of this, the Dragon could not help but to be enraged, thinking in his heart: *Here I am beseeching deities and worshipping Buddha, praying that Su Su will be safe from harm, but they can't wait for him to die. Today is only the second day of the New Year, not to mention, on the night before Mother Empress had already told*

them clearly that I will give an account of myself once the matter is settled but they are still trying to force the matter. Really, they are pushing me too far. Looks like if I don't teach them a lesson, sooner or later they will forget what kind of person I really am.

All at once, he stood up wearing an expression that was as bleak as the ocean's depths and in a low voice he said: "Since matters have come to this, Zi Yan, help me dress. I would like to go forth to the morning court and meet this gang of unfailingly loyal courtiers. I would like to see if they think that just because I always appoint people that show ability to high positions and accept their advice if I think it's sound, do they take it to mean that I am not capable of distemper."

After he was properly dressed and made ready, Wanyan Xu said to the crowd: "Look after him well, I will be back soon." So saying, he walked out of the room, with his head held high. At this juncture, when Zi Yan noticed that nobody was paying them much mind, she took the opportunity to drag Wanyan Shuo outside and in a quiet voice, she whispered a few sentences into his ear. She looked on as Wanyan Shuo's eyes grew bigger and bigger, and his little face began to take on a look of suspicion as he looked at her. She gave a bitter laugh, thinking to herself that as matters had come to this, there was no need for her to say anything further. She hurried to catch up to Wanyan Xu, and kept pace with him as they proceeded to the hall. When she thought of how a monstrous wave that could submerge the sky was going to be unleashed upon the morning court in a short while, even she, who had been through countless momentous occasions, could not help but to feel tense.

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And so, by the time that Wanyan Xu had seated himself on the Dragon Throne, the courtiers below the dais had already arrayed themselves in neat rows according to their rank. Kneeling down, they shouted their customary greeting of wishing him long life. If this had been a usual day, Wanyan Xu would have allowed the assembled courtiers to rise to their feet after that, but fury was boiling in his heart today. With a

grim look on his face, he said coldly: "Is this considered to be you paying respect to me [1]? What loyal ministers all of you are. I was still thinking that for you to come here so early on the second day of the New Year for court, your intentions must have been to continue trying to coerce me from where you left off on New Year's Eve."

He said these lines in a voice that was both hard and cold, when the assemblage heard them, a layer of cold sweat appeared on their foreheads. In unison, they said: "Your subjects will never dare. We are here because although it is still the New Year [2], we did not receive Your Majesty's decree that we shall be exempted from court during the holidays, therefore your subjects did not dare to neglect our duties."

Pretending that he had suddenly came to realise that he had made a mistake, Wanyan Xu nodded and said: "Oh, I see, so the various ministers have not come to compel me to have the former Empress Su Yi put to death. That's good, that's good. Also, on the previous night, my state of mind was thrown into chaos because of the extreme gravity of the Empress's illness, therefore I omitted to mention that the ministers need not attend court for the duration of the New Year. Doesn't matter, I'll say it now. Court will resume on the sixth day of the New Year, if there are any pressing matters that require immediate attention, then go straight to the Inner Court and request an audience with me to make your report. That's all, court is dismissed." With these few lines, he sealed the lips of all the ministers. After that, he stood up with a serene smile and prepared to leave with a flick of his sleeves.

Never in ten-thousand years would the ministers have expected the Emperor to be so straightforward. From the looks of the matter, it was evidently just as Yu Cang had said. That is, the Emperor was set on protecting Su Yi, if Su Yi managed to survive this great calamity, the Emperor would even set him up as the Empress again. How could the cadre of important ministers allow such a preposterous thing to happen under their watch? They looked at each other questioningly, finally, the high official He Jian stepped up. As the Minister in charge of the Ministry of Justice, he

held the portfolio for the proper dispensation of justice throughout the whole realm. In a high-pitch, he said: "Reporting to your Majesty, your subject has a petition."

Wanyan Xu gave a cold "humph", thinking to himself: the biggest flaw in loyal ministers is that they do not know how to read the atmosphere. He turned around slowly, wearing an extremely genial smile, he said: "Oh? If the honourable minister has a petition, then pray submit it to me quickly. I still want to go and accompany the Empress, I wonder if he has vomited blood again in the long time that I have been away from his side."

He Jian understood clearly that the Emperor had deliberately said these words for his benefit, so that He Jian will get the hint and be able to back off with good grace. But how could he retreat from his position just like that. His expression changed and with a solemn voice, he said: "Reporting to Your Majesty, Su Yi intended to incite a rebellion, his crime is great, his evil is extreme. By right, his fate should have been sealed, but he was spared because Your Majesty took into account his meritorious deed of educating the Crown Prince and exempted him from the death penalty. Although the Emperor's actions had been in violation of the prescribed laws but they could be excused under the circumstances. But now, the Emperor is actively giving medical treatment to him and furthermore, His Majesty is set on ensuring his safety, with nary a care for the laws of this Celestial Empire [3]. Everything that has happened has proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that this Su Yi is really good at confounding and charming people. For the sake of our Jin Liao state and lands, I hope that Your Majesty would be impartial enforce the law strictly. Sentence him to death, as set out in the laws of our land." With that said, he knelt and did not get up. Kowtowing, he said: "This old minister hopes that the Emperor will be mindful of the good of our land and people, and reject being confused by that sorcerer again." At this, all the ministers of the court also knelt down.

Wanyan Xu gave a cold smile and said: "I have guessed that you courtiers would surely have this matter in mind when you came here today. All that you said about

not having received the edict about being exempted from attending court, or not daring to neglect your posts was merely a front. In fact, you came here to try to force my hand on this issue. Fine, since we have reached the point of no return in our conversation today, I shall also tell you plainly that I have decided that Su Yi will be pardoned for his crimes and he will also be restored to his former status as the Empress. Since I have said this, be assured that I will never change my mind.”

Slowly, he swept his eyes over each and every courtier in the hall, all of whom had turned pale with fright and were staring at him. His eyes were flashing with a cold gleam and he said in a stern voice: “If you agree, then everybody can be happy and the ruler and his ministers will continue to get along in harmony. If anyone wants to depose me because of this, do not hesitate to step up. If anybody thinks to use the threat of their death as a means of getting me to relent, humph humph, well then everyone of you should already know that my heart is as hard as iron. Since I could stand by and watch as the Empress suffered through bitter hardship for half a year, similarly without blinking an eye, I can watch you die in the time it takes to walk five steps. Now, you can discuss among yourselves what course you shall follow.”

The ministers looked at each other incredulously, none of them daring to believe that this was none other than their eminently wise Son of Heaven. For a time, they found it difficult to contain their surging emotions; all of them were beset by abnormally intense grief. Suddenly, they saw that Wanyan Xu had turned back. Looking at He Jian, he said: “Honoured Minister He, if you do not intend to resign from your post, there is something that I wish for you to investigate.” Without waiting for He Jian’s reply, he forged ahead and said: “With regards to Empress Su Yi’s rebellion, it now seems that the whole episode is riddled with many loopholes. If he really wished to restore the Great Qi Empire, and uphold his reputation as being unyielding unto death, then he should not have confessed his affection for me as he was approaching his end. By doing so, would he not besmirch his reputation? He really should not have done that if he had intended to die as a patriot of the Great Qi. And if we take it to mean that he has had deep feelings for me all this time, then why would he plot a rebellion so readily? Not to mention, at that time, everything

happened so suddenly. The first impression is the strongest, and without examining the facts clearly, I jumped to conclusions. Now, I want you to examine the evidence in this case meticulously, see if there is anything strange about it.”

After Wanyan Xu finished his speech, the pack of ministers was in an uproar. Among them, Yu Cang had broken out in cold sweat and the droplets were sliding down steadily. When he noticed that nobody was paying him much mind, he stealthily wiped them away. At the moment the ministers were engaged in heated discussion. Passionately, they had divided into two camps. One of them maintained that this was a way for the Emperor to engineer an acquittal for Su Yi while the other faction felt that the investigation was justified because there was merit to the Emperor's doubts about the veracity of the evidence.

With a cold smile on his face, Wanyan Xu looked on as they continued to debate, making no move to stop them. Just as he was about to leave, he suddenly heard Wanyan Shuo's voice ring out from beyond the door. He said: “Imperial Father, your son and subject wishes to redress the grievances of Mother Empress. Your son and subject has found evidence that proves that Mother Empress had been framed, I beseech Imperial Father to right this wrong for Mother Empress.” The effect of his remarks on the convocation was akin to tossing an artillery shell into a body of water that was already roiling. After a burst of startled cries, everyone's eyes were locked onto the person of the Crown Prince Wanyan Shuo as he slowly made his way into the hall.

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Wanyan Xu turned his body around, casting a disbelieving look at his own son, as if he did not dare to put faith in what he had heard, for fear that it was too good to be true. Although he had already come to be suspicious of the circumstances surrounding Su Yi's defection, in the end, he had no proof to support his hunch. Moreover, in the hall on that day, Su Yi had made no protestations of innocence, but

had confessed to his guilt with no hesitation.

To hear Wanyan Shuo say words to this effect at this time, although he was overjoyed at the unexpected good news, he was also extremely doubtful and startled. Not knowing what kind of evidence he had fished up, he quickly walked back to the Dragon Throne and sat down before saying gravely: "Imperial Son must know that this is no small matter, there is no room for childish whims or temperament here. If you have any evidence, share it with us, so that the honoured ministers and I [1] can review it."

Yu Cang's face was as dark as the depths of the ocean; he thought that Zi Yan must have betrayed him and wracked his brain, trying to think of possible countermeasures to fend off this threat. However, he saw that Wanyan Shuo had produced a document and was saying: "Reporting to Imperial Father, this is the sheet of prose that Mother Empress left on the table the day he made his escape from the palace. The meaning of his words is indeed easy to understand, they state his desire to recover the rivers and mountains of his country. But there is a fine detail hidden in this document that can prove that Mother Empress was being framed by someone."

He slowly cast his gaze over the befuddled ministers, who still failed to understand the meaning of his words before saying clearly and deliberately: "Although this poem was indeed penned by Mother Empress, but it was not written at the time of Mother Empress's escape, rather it was written soon after Mother Empress had been taken prisoner." Because he had a trump card up his sleeve and was confident that he would be able to exonerate Su Yi, he had taken the initiative of referring to him as his Mother Empress once again.

At such a time, nobody had the leisure to pursue this relatively trivial matter. The critical thing was that in the early days of Su Yi's captivity, when he had yet to be crowned as the Empress, it was hardly surprising that he would still carry about in his heart a feeling of injustice and the wish to restore his country. Therefore, if the poem was dated to that time, it could hardly serve as proof of his treason. Most importantly, if it could be proven that these words were not written at the moment of his escape,

then it was more than likely that somebody with ill-intentions had utilised his poem to malign him. Because Su Yi had outstanding talent in both the literary and martial fields, he could easily have written a few hundred poems just like this one at the time of his departure, there was really no need for him to rummage through trunks and boxes just to find a older work to serve as his manifesto and parting words. At this moment, all the officials' eyes were focused on the piece of paper that Wanyan Shuo held in his hand and waiting with all ears for him to present a case that would exculpate Su Yi.

Wanyan Shuo put away the document, and walked to He Jian's side. He asked solemnly: "Honourable Minister He, the court has a question for you. At the time of Mother Empress's rebellion, it was already late in the summer. In that season, what time do you usually get up from bed?" His question was really extremely nonsensical, and more importantly, he couldn't see how it had any correlation to the matter at hand --- the exoneration of Su Yi. But when He Jian looked at this little Crown Prince, he saw that his expression was dead serious, there was a shrewd glint in his eyes, and also, he had a bearing that was intimidating even without having to demonstrate temper. He Jian couldn't help but be a bit overawed and he said, careful not to neglect any detail: "Reporting to Your Highness, this old minister is of an advanced age so he usually gets up around the third quarter of the fourth night watch, so as to be ready to attend court at the fifth watch."

Wanyan Shuo nodded his head and said: "Do you still remember what the temperature would be like when you got out of bed? Was it cold or hot?"

He Jian smiled and said: "Why would Your Highness ask that? The scorching heat of summer is at its most extreme in late summer, just as autumn approaches. When this old minister rises at the fourth watch, there is already light perspiration on his body. Upon entering the court hall at the fifth watch, because the court robes are thick and multi-layered, naturally it would be stiflingly hot."

With that, Wanyan Shuo gave an unreserved smile, nodding his head, he said: "It is just as Honourable Minister He says." Looking around at the gathered ministers again, he said: "What do all of the Honourable Ministers think? Is there half a word of

falsehood in what Honourable Minister He said?"

Although everybody was still puzzled over this turn of events, they still smiled and said in unison: "Honourable Minister He is telling the truth, when summer comes, the lands of the former Qi Empire is even hotter than the Jin Liao home country. We would be covered in beads of perspiration every day."

Wanyan Shuo seemed to be greatly satisfied with their answer, unfolding that piece of paper again, he looked at Wanyan Xu and said: "Imperial Father, herein lies the problem. Look at the first three phrases, they are: 'A few beats of the night-watch drum, I am startled awake in the room, the candles have gone out, the dawn is cold'. My question is, if this poem was indeed penned by Mother Empress at the moment he escaped to start a rebellion as his parting words to Imperial Father, then how could there be a slight chill at the fifth watch? Does the scene not fit the timing? Mother Empress has been blessed with literary talent and has great facility with crafting prose, no matter what I cannot imagine that he would resort to writing an inferior poem where his words do not match the scene."

Wanyan Xu "hmmm" for a long time as he was lost in thought. Suddenly he hastily got off the Dragon Throne and walked towards Wanyan Shuo. Seizing that piece of paper and examining it closely, his face gradually began to reveal excitement and he loudly exclaimed: "That's right, if this was really written at the time of Su Su's rebellion, why would he use the three words 'dawn is cold' in the late summer? He is not a crude person who would need to make up prose at random just so as to make a poem rhyme. From this, we can see that there is indeed something queer about this."

So saying, he looked at his son, and patted him a few times before saying loudly: "Shuo Er, you... you have really grown up. You can even notice such a minute discrepancy, it shows that you really have your Mother Empress in your heart. Unlike your Imperial Father, who only set aside that document and wasted half a year... and actually... actually failed to see through the mystery in that poem... Very good, very good, Shuo Er, to know that you have become like this... Imperial Father... Imperial Father is very delighted." His emotions were turbulent, to the point that even in front

of all the gathered ministers, he made no secret of his regret and self-censure. Wanyan Shuo's face turned red, and he sneaked a look at Zi Yan, who was still stationed behind the Dragon Throne and saw that her face was devoid of any expression. He opened his mouth, but in the end, he decided to swallow the words that he desired to say.

Wanyan Xu's face was once again impassive, and all of the courtiers could not make a guess as to the notions he was harbouring in his heart. Suddenly, they heard him say coldly: "Court is dismissed. He Jian stay behind, go to the South Study and await my instructions." With that said, he strode off with a flick of his sleeves.

He Jian followed him to the South Study, and saw him pace for a few steps before suddenly stopping. With a sombre expression, he said: "He Jian, I order you to conduct a thorough investigation of this matter, it is imperative that you uncover who it was that had framed the Empress. Humph, that person's scheme was sophisticated; he must have had a secret weapon that could force the Empress to make a false confession to the court against his will. You must pursue this affair until you get to the bottom of it." He pondered over his options for a little while before continuing: "The Empress has strength of character and he has always been straightforward and upright in his ways. It cannot be that it was his personal affairs that gave someone the ammunition to use against him. The most likely scenario is that that person had some hostages on hand or something of that sort. You have to be careful and you are not to divulge even the slightest bit of information to anybody else. You must ensure that not even a single person is injured or killed in the course of your investigation. Do you understand?"

He Jian knelt down and said solemnly: "Your Majesty need not worry, this old minister will definitely bend to the task and spare no effort. I will be sure to uncover the identity of this most malevolent villain so that he can be punished according to the laws of our land." After saying that, he got up and retired. At this time, Wanyan Xu thought of how he had wronged Su Yi, and caused him to endure so much suffering. He couldn't help but to feel ashamed and his heart felt like it was being stirred with a knife. He hesitated for a long time, before finally heaving a sigh and with a face coloured by shame, he went to see Su Yi.

War Prisoner Chapter 82

As for Su Yi, after he had received treatment from Wanyan Xia, his condition indeed improved miraculously and he had yet to spit out another mouthful of blood. When he woke up at mid-morning, he felt that his body was feeling much more comfortable than before. The nausea and pain that had plagued him was almost totally gone. Zi Nong and the rest were relieved to see that he was on the mend, and after the medicinal decoction was sent up, Zi Nong served it to him.

Wanyan Xia smiled and said: "In the end, you are really a general. Your body still has a foundation of strength, if that wasn't the case, with the way you were throwing up blood, you should have died several times over." With that, he said to Zi Nong: "Since he is not feeling nauseous at this time, quickly go to the kitchen and get some light and thin porridge for him. We don't need a lot of it, it is just to replenish his stomach a little to stave off hunger pangs."

Zi Nong agreed and left, leaving the few people in the room to have a merry chat. Suddenly she heard the sound of approaching footsteps from beyond the room. The curtains over the doors were quickly lifted by palace maids and Wanyan Xu rushed headlong into the room. Guilt and shame were written all over his face and there were tears clinging to the corner of his eyes. Su Yi was greatly alarmed; just as he was considering what could have happened to cause Wanyan Xu to be in this state, he saw that he had stepped forward and was now clutching his hand in a death-grip. He kept on weeping, but he did not say a word.

Su Yi was growing increasingly anxious, shaking his hand, he said: "Wanyan, what has happened to you?" Seeing that Su Yi was growing distressed, Wanyan Xu was afraid that he would vomit blood again. Only then did he wipe away his tears, and in a voice that still sounded choked up, he said: "Su Su... why did you... confess to the accusations against you? Why did you choose to endure that kind of... grievance that is as great as the Heavens, why... didn't you tell me? No, that's not right, that... that's not your fault... not your fault."

Suddenly, he gave himself a fierce slap on his face and said: "It was I, I was the greatest scoundrel, why did I not believe in you, why did I not believe? How can I have the face to stand in front of you again? Su Su, knowing what I've done to you, how could I have the face to stay by your side?" As he was speaking he had been slapping himself in the face. His two cheeks were already slightly swollen up.

Su Yi's bleeding had just been staunched, although the symptoms that had caused him so much discomfort had been largely eradicated, his body was still feeling very feeble. He was totally unable to prevent Wanyan Xu's self-flagellation. To see that his beloved's emotions were already somewhat unstable because of his overt guilt and self-condemnation, Su Yi was both panicked and afraid. He had no alternative but to gather Wanyan Xu into his arms, and now weeping himself, he said: "Don't be like this Wanyan, don't be like this, it had nothing to do with you... nothing to do with you... I know that you are good to me... I know... on that rainy night, you brought me medicine and a quilt. On that winter's day, the reason you sent for me to play the flute was to give me a chance to warm up, all of that.... I know all of that."

When he said these words, Wanyan Xu began to cry even more fiercely. The dark clouds that he had long kept buried in his heart were finally able to be dispelled, for a long time he stayed like this, burying his head in Su Yi's thin and frail chest. He did not care that as the Emperor, he should be dignified. He did not care that there were many people around them who were watching him, including Wanyan Xia who hated him deeply. In the same fashion, he continued to weep. Su Yi also could not keep his tears from flowing down his face, as if coaxing a child, he slowly patted and stroked him while saying softly: "It's in the past, Wanyan Xu, it is all in the past... all in the past." With his feelings so turbulent, he even forgot to ask Wanyan Xu how he had managed to find out the truth about Su Yi having been framed.

Everybody else stood to the side, utterly silent. Shortly after Wanyan Xu's arrival, Wanyan Shuo had also entered the room, to be met with the sight of him and Su Yi holding each other and crying together. He had never before seen his Imperial Father or Su Yi like this; the two of them were looking so fragile. In that moment, he was also at a loss for words and could only stand there quietly and look on.

Suddenly, he saw that Wanyan Xia had stood up. A bleak smile flitted over his face, and in a low voice he murmured to himself: "The clouds part to reveal a full moon, it is a fine day after the rain passes, humph humph, So the two of you have managed to wait for this day to come, as for me..." As he said this, it seemed as though he also could not hold back his tears and he turned and left. Wanyan Shuo was worried, in his heart he was thinking that if this uncle, who was really a miraculous physician, was storming off in anger, then there would be no other recourse for Mother Empress's illness. With that thought, he hurried after Wanyan Xia.

At this point, a palace maid delivered some fine porridge to the room and Zi Nong went up to them carrying a bowl. She said: "Your Majesty, please step aside for a bit. Ask Young Master to have some porridge, he must have been hungry for quite some time." Before she could finish, she saw that Wanyan Xu's face was again blanketed by an expression of shame, and she promptly came to the realisation that she had said something indiscreet. Just as she was feeling awkward, she saw that Su Yi was pointing at the bowl of porridge on the table. With a hint of a blush on his face, he haltingly mumbled to Wanyan Xu: "I... have no strength... you... will you feed me the porridge?"

It turned out that Su Yi knew that at this moment his beloved was being engulfed by strong feelings of guilt and self-recrimination, and he also knew that in the short-term, it would be difficult to convince Wanyan Xu that he really did not need to blame himself. Thus, he endured the embarrassment in his heart and asked Wanyan Xu to do something for him, hoping to alleviate some of the guilt he was feeling. He gave a sigh, actually his beloved had done nothing wrong, it was Su Yi who had made the choice that had precipitated all that had happened. If they were to discuss fault, it was Su Yi who had committed more wrongs, if it wasn't for the fact that he had unequivocally confessed to plotting a rebellion, how would Wanyan Xu have believed in that lie so easily?

Wanyan Xu was overjoyed at the unexpected request and in his eagerness, he voiced his agreement repeatedly: "Yes yes yes, I will feed it to you right now, I will feed you now." He stood up, re-seated himself on the bed and took Su Yi, whose face was now flushed scarlet, into his embrace. Scooping out a small spoonful of

porridge from the bowl, he placed it gently in Su Yi's lips.

Faced with Zi Nong and the rest, who were looking on with mirth in their eyes, Su Yi refused to open his mouth no matter what Wanyan Xu said. Wanyan Xu was stumped at his behaviour for a while but he soon came to understand the problem. Looking at his most trusted and favoured attendants, with no change to his expression, he said: "Ke ke [2]... All of you go out... go on, go out. Without my express orders, you are not to... come in, even to wait on us."

Zi Nong and the rest nodded and said: "Yes, Your Majesty." But after sticking out their tongues impishly, they said: "But Your Majesty, Young Master's body is still weak, there are some things... that should only be done after a longer period of patient waiting." So saying, they paid no mind to the fierce, skin-flaying glare that Wanyan Xu turned on them, and giggled as they departed the room. After that, the only people who remained in the room were a pair of lovers. After having been given a new lease on life after surviving a calamity, they are now entangled together in an embrace.

War Prisoner Chapter 83

The afternoon sun was hanging high up in the sky, radiating warm rays of light onto the lands. There was not even a trace of wind in the air; a day of warmth had finally been ushered in to break the monotony of this exceptionally cold winter.

In the Imperial Gardens Su Yi, bundled up in a luxurious coat made of fox fur, was sitting in a pavilion together with Wanyan Xu and his son. Around the pavilion were dozens of plum trees, their blossoms were still in full bloom and were incomparably beautiful with their brilliant colour. Several lovely palace maids were playing and joking among the plum trees, adding a touch of refinement and a thread of fun to the scene.

Wanyan Xu broke a small cake into two halves; ferrying one of them to the side of Su Yi's mouth, he smiled and said: "This cake is extremely soft and light, I [1]

ordered the Imperial Kitchen to prepare it specially for you. Although I don't dare to let you eat too much, I think just a little bit would do no harm." He looked on as Su Yi finished eating the morsel and saw that there were a few crumbs clinging to the corner of his mouth. His heart was moved and was gripped by a sudden impulse. He had leaned over was just about to plant a kiss there, when he saw that his lover was blushing. Pushing him away, Su Yi lightly scolded him: "Even in front of children, you are so improper."

Only then did he remember his son. Turning his head for a look, he saw that Wanyan Shuo was looking in their direction with two wide eyes. The boy's gaze was flashing with an expression of excitement and he was staring at Wanyan Xu unblinkingly. Wanyan Xu couldn't help but feel great embarrassment in his heart; he busied himself with deliberately serious expression and after giving a few coughs, he said: "Shuo Er, have you completed your homework?"

"I've completed it." Very solemnly, Wanyan Shuo nodded his head and said: "Mother Empress has checked my work before we came here and also praised me for being clever. He even marvelled that I could actually learn the substance of so much content in such a short period of time and said that this was unfortunate because it left him with no excuse to keep me in the study." When he finished speaking, Su Yi's face had turned an even deeper shade of red, against his expectations, his little mutterings to himself had been overheard by this little devil.

It seems that having a son that was too bright could be a troublesome matter indeed. Wanyan Xu felt his head beginning to ache as he was thinking. Even more than his beloved, he wished to be able to keep Wanyan Shuo locked up in the study room. As he was wracking his brains trying to think of a way to get the boy to leave, Wanyan Shuo had already approached the two men with an air of mystery.

Leaning over, he whispered conspiratorially: "Imperial Father, Mother Empress don't be like this, just take it as I'm not here." So saying, he hid a smile behind his sleeve and asked his Imperial Father: "Ah, Imperial Father, I know what you wanted to do just now, but can you really lick everything clean in a short time?" When he saw that Wanyan Xu was looking at him with uncomprehending eyes, he said, in a calm and

easy-going way: “Aiya, I mean the dregs of the cake around Mother Empress's mouth, how many times will you have to lick before you can remove all of them?” When he saw that Su Yi had ducked his head down quickly and even his ears had turned red, his mood was even more elevated and he started laughing loudly.

As if the little imp was demanding his life, his old dad suddenly said in a strangled, outraged voice: “You... I will have you immediately go and study how to critique and evaluate petitions! Now! Or you can go and play somewhere else; in short, you are not to stay here and play the fool. If you don't leave within the next minute, beware that I don't pulverise you to dust, so that even the dregs of your bones will leave no traces.”

“Imperial Father, you can say such things without even a slight change to your expression, is it really true that after one has been the Emperor for a long time, one's skin would become thicker and thicker? I merely asked an innocent question, and you started to treat your son this way. You even managed to come up with these highfalutin and pompous reasons, just who is playing the fool?”

Taking advantage of the fact that his Mother Empress was at his side, Wanyan Shuo used him for cover and continued to complain with a bold manner, as if he had been wronged. Oh, it had obviously been Imperial Father who was in the wrong, all he did was to ask a question, but his Imperial Father had actually cruelly trampled all over his attempt to be studious. His little mouth pursed up in a pout, he said: “Imperial Father, then you shall have to feed me a cake too, I will leave after you have fed me. You don't have to worry, I will be fine no matter how much I eat, so you can pick out an especially large piece to feed to me.”

“You... I will have you go and play this very second. I will have the Imperial Kitchens send you a basket full of cakes later. Or else I will turn you into a cake right here.” Wanyan Xu said fiercely as he put on the demeanour of a strict father. Humph, this little thing was definitely doing this intentionally. He stewed in his thoughts, not believing that with his son's intelligence, the boy would fail to understand what the action of feeding each other cakes represented between Su Su and himself.

“Mother Empress, Imperial Father is bullying me, Mother Empress must stand up for me.” If he would be willing to listen to instructions obediently, then Wanyan Shuo would be undeserving of his moniker as the little devil. Judging the hour and sizing up the situation, the little devil quickly found and took up position in the most favourable terrain to use against his father --- he hid himself within Su Yi's arms, antagonizing Wanyan Xu to the point where his teeth began to itch. True to his expectations, he soon heard his beloved say with a bit of displeasure: “Wanyan, you are still a father after all, why treat your own son so harshly.”

“Harsh? I... I am going to vomit blood because of him soon.” Finally, he had enough of being jealous of his own son. Extending a long arm to fish for Wanyan Shuo, he managed to pull him over. Just as he was going to give him an extended scolding, he suddenly heard a pleasant voice saying: “Vomit blood? Are you going to vomit blood too? That’s just nice, this time round, I can definitely achieve my goal to look on without lifting a finger.” Following that, Wanyan Xia slowly walked into the pavilion with a little servant girl following at his back holding onto a box of food, on top of which was a small lidded teacup. He gave Su Yi a glance and said blandly: “This decoction is not easy to brew, therefore I did not leave its preparation to the hands of others. Drink it down quickly, it will do your illness a world of good.”

When Wanyan Shuo saw Wanyan Xia, with a "shua" sound, his gaze had began to gleam [2]. He jumped out of Su Yi's embrace and said: “Second Uncle, you have arrived? Come, let's go and play.”

Wanyan Xia took fright at his words, and stumbled back a couple of steps and held out his hands as if to ward him off. Just when he was about to open his mouth to decline, he saw that Wanyan Xu's eyes had also brightened. With a hearty laugh, he said: “Ah, Xia Er you have come at just the right time. Quickly bring this little pest of a child away to play.”

Wanyan Xia's face turned black and he said resentfully: “The two of you want to get intimate, and I know that you find Shuo Er's presence here to be too obtrusive but do you really need to make me become the sacrificial lamb? It's not as if you do not know how much he messed with me the last time.” Although his lips were saying

these words, he still caught hold of Wanyan Shuo's hand with his own. He sighed helplessly and said: "Ah, what a little devil you really are." As he said this, he was leading the boy away.

War Prisoner Chapter 84

As Su Yi looked at the retreating figures of the two people, he couldn't help but to give a knowing smile as he said to Wanyan Xu: "Looking at this pair of uncle and nephew, even though they are not related by blood at all, they have a warmer relationship than many other uncles and nephews that really have consanguinity. I have never seen Shuo Er become so stuck to someone's side in this manner before."

Wanyan Xu also smiled and said. "It is only because that little fellow knows that although Xia Er's temperament is cold and aloof, he is still extremely open and guileless. With such a character, he can provide him with endless amusement. What I did not expect is that Xia Er will actually put up with his nonsense. With a character like his, I really thought that after he had suffered several losses at Shuo Er's hands, he would certainly chase that little fellow away." So saying, he gave a sigh and continued: "Previously, I still did not believe that he could bring himself to treat us with sincerity, after all, such deeply held grudges and hatred is not something that could be forgotten easily. But who could have thought that after just a few occasions, even I cannot help but come to think of him as my own kin younger brother."

Su Yi nodded his head and said: "Although his face is always impassive, but his heart is very warm. For someone like him to have spent his life in loneliness ever since his childhood, how could he not crave familial affection now? I am really gratified to be able to say this, I heard from Zi Nong that just the other day, the Empress Dowager came upon him on a small path by coincidence. By right, it should have been a very awkward scene, but Shuo Er managed to smooth it over and the Empress Dowager even allowed him to bring Shuo Er to her palace in future to play. In my opinion, this is really a most desirable outcome." Claspng him, Wanyan Xu

smiled and said: "Exactly so, come to think if it, we have to thank you for everything."

Su Yi looked closely at his expression, and deemed him to be exceptionally happy at the moment. After hesitating for a moment, he beamed and opened his mouth to say: "Wanyan, since everything has come to such a satisfactory conclusion, then let us not pursue those things that happened in the past..." Before he could finish his speech, he saw that a murderous glint had flashed in Wanyan Xu's eyes.

Wanyan Xu said blandly: "I have my own ideas about that matter." So saying, he looked towards Su Yi. Fearing that he would be uneasy, he quickly put on a smile and brought the bowl of soup to his line of sight and said: "Su Su, tomorrow will be the day of the Lantern Festival [2], I have said that we won't speak of official matters during this period of time, why then, spoil the fun with such talk. Come, be good and finish drinking this bowl of soup."

Su Yi looked at the bowl of soup with furrowed brows, after a long time, his face began to take on a pleading look as he looked towards Wanyan Xu and said: "My illness has been more or less cured... can I... can I not drink this? It's really very bitter." He looked at Wanyan Xu, who was wearing a helpless look on his face, and thought again of how that decoction was really bitter to the extreme. Unconsciously he shifted forward, closer to Wanyan Xu, and tugging on his lover's robes, he said plaintively: "Promise me, Wanyan. It is really extremely bitter, let me skip it just this once, alright? Just this once please." Even if Su Yi himself did not realise it, his actions at this moment could be very plainly categorised as a kind of behaviour that was termed as "coquettish" [3].

Wanyan Xu looked at him, and saw that his face was flushed red as he pleaded earnestly with him. He had never seen Su Yi this way before --- he was showing his softer side readily. He felt that this was an exceedingly fascinating and charming aspect of Su Yi, so intoxicating that at this moment, he didn't even know where his own soul had flown off to. It seemed that he only regained his senses after half a day; when he did, he could not help but to hug Su Yi and hoisted him up only to resettle him onto his own lap. In a solemn voice, Wanyan Xu said: "Since Su Su says that the medicine is bitter, then let me drink it together with you. Previously, when

you were suffering punishment for those crimes, I had no way to share them with you but from now on, if you meet with any matter that you find bitter, I will undertake them together with you.” So saying, he took up the bowl of medicine and took a big gulp into his mouth.

Su Yi gaped at him for a spell, dumbstruck. He had never expected that Wanyan Xu would actually do such a thing and he couldn't help but to say urgently: “Really, you are too wilful, you even consume medicine recklessly... oh...” The rest of his words were drowned within Wanyan Xu's mouth, and a bitter taste gradually began to spread around his own mouth. It turned out that Wanyan Xu had not actually consumed the medicine, but he was merely using his mouth to transfer the medicine to Su Yi.

“Ke ke ke...” The medicine tasted so bitter that Su Yi choked and had to cough a few times. Su Yi gave Wanyan Xu a fierce glare, before saying peevishly: “It's better if I do it myself.” So saying, he picked up the down of medicine and downed its contents in one gulp, pinching his nose all the while. To see him act rashly out of a feeling of injustice was so amusing to Wanyan Xu that he had to laugh out loud; he felt that this type of Su Yi was really matchlessly adorable. He said: “Is it really so bitter? En [4] ...” He didn't finish the sentence, instead he bent his body and using his lips, he removed the dregs of bitter medicine that remained in Su Yi's mouth. Gradually, this already ambiguous gesture that carried a tinge of licentiousness developed into fiery hot deep kissing.

The plum tree grove was still and quiet at this time, among the palace maids and eunuchs chosen to serve them, there was not one who would not be circumspect. They had discreetly retreated long ago; at this time, in this delicately fragrant nook between Heaven and Earth, only two people were left and they were immersed in an atmosphere that was as sweet as honey.

Suddenly a voice rang out that promptly managed to kill the beautiful mood. It said: “Imperial Father, Mother Empress.” An overexcited child rushed headlong into the pavilion only to see the two people who he had addressed as Imperial Father and Mother Empress jump apart at a speed that was akin to a clap of thunder reaching

the ear. With the greatest difficulty they recovered and managed to sit upright and still in a more decorous fashion.

“Mother Empress.” A mischievous smile was written all over Wanyan Shuo's countenance.

“En?” Although Su Yi was striving with all his might to achieve a calm voice, he still could not disguise the discomfiture and embarrassment in his tone.

“Ke ke, the buttons on your clothes are all undone.” Wanyan Shuo “kindly” brought this to his attention, causing his Empress Mother to immediately hang down his head, so that it was hidden below the level of the top of the table. Wickedly, he refused to let the utterly mortified Su Yi off and said: “As far as I can tell, on a cold day as this, it is really not suitable to engage in any exercise that would necessitate the undoing of one's clothes. This is especially so since Mother Empress's body is still weak, besides no matter how you see it, this is still just a pavilion...”

Behind his beloved, Wanyan Xu received a heavy punch from him. It hurt so much that the pain had almost distorted his face; it would seem like this time, his beloved was really angry. Just now, he had desperately tried to dissuade Wanyan Xu but he was still being teased over the debauched appearance that Wanyan Xu had caused. For Su Yi not to kill him could already be considered a mercy. To deal with this son -- small of stature, but big on mischief and derring-do --- Wanyan Xu was reduced to shouting out in a very irresponsible manner: “Xia Er, Xia Er, quickly come and take Shuo Er to play...”

“No need to shout anymore. The bones in the broken leg of the rabbit in Uncle's house have grown longer and is ready to be set, he is busy right now.” Wanyan Shuo gave his Imperial Father an assessing look. Sure enough, he saw that his Imperial Father was looking back at him in bewilderment. He said: “What does that have to do with taking you away to play...? What? What did you say?” Just as he was sighing to himself that his Imperial Father was really too stupid, he was momentarily stunned by the loud roar he gave. Wanyan Xu stood up in great excitement, in his haste his trembling hand knocked a few dishes off of the table and

a flurry of crashing noises soon followed.

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Su Yi got a shock. Stunned, he raised his head and said: "Wanyan, what has gotten into you?" Before his voice had even faded, Wanyan Xu had grabbed him into his embrace and was continually planting kisses all over his face. His eyes were lit up from within and were flashing with excitement. In a loud voice he cried out: "Su Su did you hear that? The rabbit's broken leg has lengthened, the broken leg lengthened."

"Yes, I did hear that." Su Yi was feeling puzzled; his lover had always been fond of hunting and had never been partial to small animals, it was exceeding strange that he would get this excited over a poor little rabbit. With a start, Su Yi suddenly came to a realisation and he looked straight at Wanyan Xu and said: "You... you are saying... the rabbit's broken leg..." Even he, the one who was never expressive when receiving honour or disgrace, could not help a tidal wave from surging up in his heart at this news. If he wasn't for the fact that he was already in Wanyan Xu's embrace, he could not say if he would still be able to stand up.

"That's right, Su Su" Wanyan Xu looked back at him joyously, by the light of the sun, Su Yi could see that his eyes had become overlaid by a layer of watery mist. At this news, this dictatorial man whose status was second to none was actually choking up with emotion at this moment and he said: "Su Su, your leg... your leg... at last... k eke, at such a happy moment, why do I [1]... why instead... aii, let's not speak of that, let's go to Xia Er's place to take a look instead." Although he said but a few simple lines, Su Yi well understood that encompassed within them were profound hopes and deep feelings.

In the past ten or so days, Wanyan Xu had put his heart and soul into taking care of him. Even when it came to mundane tasks like pouring out his tea, delivering water for his washing up, wiping his body or feeding him medicine he refused to have other

people attend to Su Yi. At night, he would lie down by Su Yi's side, watching over him as he fell asleep. Su Yi had lost count of how many times he had awoken from his dreams to see that a pair of deep eyes --- full of sorrow and remorse --- was looking fixedly upon his broken leg in a gently and loving manner. Every time this happened, he would quickly close his own eyes and feign sleep, because he knew that Wanyan Xu would not wish for Si Yi to see him looking so helpless. Su Yi understood that this broken leg had become a painful burden that his lover will have to carry for the rest of their lives. As long as Su Yi still appeared in front of him, that guilt will never vanish and that bleeding wound in his heart would never be able to heal. He did not wish for Wanyan Xu to be like this but at the same time he also fully understood that he could do nothing about it. When faced with that leg, the power of words would pale in comparison and all of his attempts to persuade Wanyan Xu that he should not blame himself would fail.

But now, to think that they actually heard such an unexpected piece of news, perhaps there was a chance that the last dark cloud that between him and Wanyan Xu could finally be fully dissipated, so that there will be no traces of it left in their lives. How could this not make Su Yi almost delirious with joy? Their eyes met, and they both shared a laugh. Without the need for any more words, both of them were confident that the other knew what they were thinking. Wanyan Xu lovingly planted a smooch on his lips, before saying softly: "Let's go to Xia Er's place right now."

"Hey... wait... wait for me." Wanyan Shuo lagged behind them, panting hard and out of breath. That atrocious Imperial Father, he had actually employed his Qinggong [2] for maximum speed. Humph humph, he treated Mother Empress so well but he did not even have a word of thanks for himself, who had come all the way to disclose this information to them. As he was complaining, he was stepping out of the plum tree grove. By this time, the two people had gone so far that they appeared to be a mere black speck on the horizon. He pursed his lips in disgruntlement, and decided that he might as well give up on chasing after them. As he rested to even out his breathing, out of the corner of his eye he saw a figure flash past, when he took a closer look, he found that it was none other than Zi Yan.

"Where are the Emperor and the Empress?" When she saw that Wanyan Shuo was

the only person there, she could not help but to be surprised. She had been told clearly that the Emperor and Empress would be here.

“They ran off to have a look at the rabbit.” Wanyan Shuo snapped out ungraciously. When he saw that Zi Yan was looking at him with a questioning gaze, he simply decided to pick out a large stone and sat himself down on it before explaining patiently: “Second uncle has developed a medicine that can mend broken legs, Imperial Father and Mother Empress have gone over to his place to have a look. Were you looking for them for a particular reason?”

Zi Yan shook her head and said: “No reason, I just came to wait on them.” She turned and was just about to leave when she suddenly heard Wanyan Ship say in a low voice: “Stop right there.” After that, that little Crown Prince slowly paced to stand in front of her. Looking directly into her eyes, he said calmly: “Mother Empress was framed, you... did you participate in it? Otherwise how would you know of that secret buried between the lines of prose? That was only a minute detail, if someone is not personally invested in the matter, they would definitely not be able to spot the clue. That being the case, then why did you help him to reverse the verdict on his guilt? If you had recognised that you were on the wrong path and wished to make amends, then why did you have me claim the credit for this discovery, wouldn't it be better for you if you could atone for your crimes by a meritorious act?”

Zi Yan gave a slight smile and said: “Your Highness the Crown Prince, as for this secret, it is enough that you and I are the only people who know of it. Your humble servant did it for the Emperor. Whether it was the act of framing the Empress or the act of saving the Empress, my actions were always calculated to benefit His Majesty. As for trying to redeem myself through meritorious deeds...” Here, she gave a cold laugh before continuing: “A crime is a crime, there is no reason that redemption should be an option. A person must bear the consequences of his own actions, since I am guilty, I shall receive my punishment. I already said that I saved the Empress for the sake of His Majesty, if I were to use this deed as a justification for the reduction of my punishment then not only will other people look down on me, even I will also sneer at myself.” She looked at Wanyan Shuo again and bowed before saying: “Your Highness, if there are no other matters, your humble servant shall take her leave.”

Wanyan Shuo nodded and she left. His eyes followed the retreating figure of this female attendant as she left with a head held high. Suddenly, a feeling of deep veneration for her began to well up in his heart. Without judging whether her conduct and deeds were right or wrong, but with regards to this display of pride and the gumption to assume responsibility for her actions, he felt that these qualities were worthy of applause.

He stood up happily and continued to walk towards Wanyan Xia's place of residence while musing to himself: "The affairs of the mortal realm are strange indeed. Mother Empress is such a good person; when he sees people with such valiant character who are unafraid of death, he will try even harder to save them. Oh Imperial Father, I know that you have always been scrupulous in separating public concerns from private interests but when you are faced with Empress Mother, your defences are really puny to the point of being pitiful. Ha ha ha, seems like there will be good show to watch soon." As he got to the later parts of his speech, the little devil had begun to take joy in calamity and delight in disaster. In anticipation of the impending fireworks, he had begun to laugh merrily with his face upturned to the sky.

War Prisoner Chapter 86

Ever since Wanyan Xia had saved Su Yi's life, he had stopped residing in that shabby wooden structure by the side of the North Lake. Instead, Wanyan Xu had specially arranged for him to live in a small hall [1] to the side of the Garden of Merriment. One reason was that the locale made it more convenient for him to continue treating Su Yi's illness; another reason is that the two could be considered old comrades who shared a bond that was forged through shared trials and tribulations; to alleviate boredom they could enjoy conversing with each other.

Although there was a multitude of people within the palace, but still, the vast majority were women. Although Wanyan Shuo was adorable, there were lessons that needed his attention and moreover, his temper was as eccentric as a genie's. As they had

more things in common, it was better for Su Yi to have Wanyan Xia to converse with. Wanyan Xu had originally thought of sending for Xu Jinhua to come into the palace and keep Su Yi company but he did not know his whereabouts and therefore he had to give up this notion. From all this, it could be seen that he had gone to a lot of trouble to make Su Yi's daily life as enjoyable as possible.

And now, Wanyan Xu carried Su Yi in his arms and flew all the way to Wanyan Xia's residence. Wanyan Xia spotted them coming even when they were still a long distance away but did not bother to go and welcome them. Instead he continued to manipulate the rabbit's back leg and when the two people approached, he said blandly: "What long ears you have, they are even longer than this rabbit's. It must be Shuo Er who informed you of this. Just as I thought, he is incapable of keeping this a secret."

Wanyan Xu said urgently: "Worthy little brother, let us not waste time speaking of things that are not important. When all is said and done, how has your research progressed? Su Su... Su Su's leg... Can the break really be fully mended?" Although the tone of his voice was full of hope, the look on his face revealed his worries; he was afraid that the answer he would soon hear would cause Su Yi and him to have rejoiced in vain.

When Wanyan Xia saw that he was in this state, he could not help but to relent and a hint of a smile revealed itself on his usually cold and impassive face. He said: "It has cost me endless effort but this time, the leg that was broken in a few places has been mended with much difficulty." With that, he looked towards Su Yi, who was still clasped in Wanyan Xu's arms and said: "You don't have to worry, as long as your leg bones have not been utterly shattered into bits, I will be able to restore your leg. It's just that..."

Suddenly, he shut his mouth and his face betrayed a trace of vacillation, as if he could not quite bring himself to administer the treatment to Su Yi. He looked at Su Yi again and said: "It's just that this method of treatment is really too painful and it takes a long time to be completed. This rabbit has almost died from the pain a few times. Every time I hear the screams that it gives before it collapses, I almost cannot bear

to continue treating it. I wonder if you... can manage to endure it.”

Upon hearing these words, Wanyan Xu promptly began to get anxious again. Without thinking about it, he blurted out: “It’s so painful? Then what shall we do...” Before he could finish, Su Yi had already caught hold of his hand. With a smile, Su Yi said: “Perhaps the Second Prince is under the mistaken impression that I am too weak to stand up to even the wind. In any case, I was once a General. Today, although... although I am living in the Inner Court, but my true nature remains unchanged. This is just a little bit of physical suffering, what is so unbearable about it? Please do not hesitate to carry out your treatment plan, even if it does not take, I will still be grateful to you.”

Wanyan Xia made a sound of displeasure and said: “Remember that you said these words yourself. If it were anybody else, I would not treat him. The most important thing when it comes to healing is to have a plan in advance and solutions in reserve. There are no benefits in having any doubts before the start of treatment.” With that said, he released the rabbit and said: “Poor little thing, you are completely alright now.” After that, he called over one of his own palace maids and said: “Bring it out and let it have a good feed, it has suffered much over this period of time.”

When Wanyan Xu saw that he was so confident, his heart was truly elated, but at the same time he worried that he would recall all the ways that Wanyan Xu had wronged him in the past, therefore he quickly put on a smile and said: “Xia Er, do you have enough help with only these palace maids? Let me [2] assign a few more to your service...” Before he could finish, Wanyan Xia already had some insight as to what was on his mind. With a smile, he said: “Don’t worry, I will certainly treat him.” And then, he shook his head and looking towards Su Yi, he said: “I really do not know what spell you could have used from whichever school of sorcery, that could cause even this person who has a heart of stone to become this bewitched by you.”

Both feeling somewhat embarrassed, Wanyan Xu and Su Yi bowed their heads. Suddenly they heard Zi Nong's voice coming from beyond the door, saying: “Your Majesty, Honourable Minister He says that he has something to report to you, he is waiting in the Royal Study for an audience now.” Su Yi quickly said: “Since a matter

of State has come up, you should go quickly and see to it.”

When he saw that Wanyan Xu’s expression had changed, he could help but to feel that something strange was afoot, could it be that Wanyan Xu knew what the matter was? He watched as Wanyan Xu placed him down and left wearing an expression that was as bleak as the depths of the ocean. Just as he was feeling increasingly puzzled, he suddenly heard Wanyan Xia give a cold laugh and say: “And to think that you are usually so clever. I have heard from Shuo Er that this Honourable Minister He is the Minister of Justice. It must be that Imperial... Imperial Elder Brother has asked him to investigate the circumstances behind your rebellion. Otherwise at a time like this, would there be another matter that could cause him to wear this kind of expression?”

Su Yi was greatly startled. In this period of time, Wanyan Xu had been looking after him with the greatest possible care and Su Yi had wholeheartedly been feeling blessed and blissful beyond measure. Although he had thought of those scholars occasionally, he had also remembered Zi Yan's guarantee to himself at those times. Thus he had been lulled into believing that the matter was not pressing and allowed himself to continue to luxuriate in the happy times, thinking that it would be good if he could continue to enjoy them for even one second more. Su Yi could never have predicted that this matter would be brought to the fore so fast.

Also, Su Yi could not have understood better than he already did about what type of person Wanyan Xu was. Although he now spoiled Su Yi to this extent and had feelings of guilt towards Su Yi but once he learned of the scholars’ rebellion, it was impossible for him to let them off just because of his personal feelings for Su Yi. Actually, he could not fault Wanyan Xu for that, if Su Yi were standing in his shoes, he could not possibly let those people off either. Otherwise, how could he face his courtiers and even the common people? Even worse, it would set a bad precedent that would only encourage those people who still sought to stage a rebellion. In the first place, that was also the reason why he had chosen to confess to plotting a rebellion rather than to let Wanyan Xu find out the truth. It wasn't that he did not trust Wanyan Xu, but it was because he understood the seriousness of the situation all too well.

As he was feeling anxious, so anxious that he felt that he was burning up on the inside, Zi Nong suddenly walked into the room again. She was muttering: "What devilry is this again?" When she saw Su Yi, she said hurriedly: "Young Master is this not strange? Zi Yan insisted on forcing me to come and get you to go to the Imperial Study to eavesdrop on His Majesty. She even said that it is the only way to let you rest easy about something; I cannot understand what she meant at all. Young Master do you want to go?" At the same time she was speaking, a few eunuchs had already carried over a sedan chair.

"Yes, naturally I want to go." Su Yi could not conceal his emotions any longer and his anxiety was written all over his face. He understood that Zi Yan must have fulfilled her promise but was afraid that he would not believe her and thus, she had wanted Zi Nong to bring him over to listen for himself. He saw that Zi Nong was getting more and more suspicious, although she did not ask any more questions as the eunuchs lifted him onto the sedan chair and carried him in the direction of the Imperial Study.

War Prisoner Chapter 87

In the Imperial Study, Wanyan Xu was sitting rigidly upon the Dragon Throne and Zi Yan was stationed behind him, ready to attend to his needs. In contrast, the terrified He Jian was standing below with beads of cold sweat constantly forming and dripping from his head. Only after a long time did he finally hear Wanyan Xu say in a deep voice: "He... actually had the guts to be so bold?"

He Jian hurriedly knelt down and said: "Your loyal subject does not dare to deceive the Emperor. The scholars numbered well over a hundred and they had indeed been secretly arrested and imprisoned by the Honourable Minister Yu. With the assistance of Miss Zi Yan, your loyal subject has already taken those people into the custody of the Ministry of Justice and they have been transferred to our prison to await further instructions from Your Majesty. The people who were guarding these scholars attempted to commit suicide on the spot, fortunately they were unsuccessful. They are now undergoing interrogation in the Ministry of Justice, i believe that we will soon

see some results. This old minister thinks that it is most likely that General Yu used these scholars as collateral. The Empress is of a kindly disposition and good-hearted, and he was likely blackmailed into falsely confessing to the crime of treason.”

Wanyan Xu gave a cold laugh and said: “Is that so? Honourable Minister He has managed to reach a verdict so soon? Can this matter really be so thoroughly investigated in such a short time? Who was it who previously said that the Empress was definitely guilty of treason and that he must be put to death?” Before the sound of his voice had even faded, He Jian had given a few kowtows before saying: “This old official was ignorant to be deceived by others; he is guilty of a crime for which one deserves to die a thousand times.”

Only then did Wanyan Xu relax his face and say in a warm voice: “Honourable Minister, please rise. As the saying goes, he who is in the dark is innocent of the crime. Tomorrow when court is in session, you shall give an in-depth explanation of all the causes and events of this matter to the assembly.” With that, he sank into deep thought and did not speak further. He Jian gave a glance to Zi Yan and only when he saw that she had given him a slight nod did he step forward and say: “Reporting to Your Majesty, your loyal subject requests that your Majesty give instructions as to how we should handle the rebellious scholars.”

At the moment, Wanyan Xu was in a quandary over this matter. Now, he finally understood why Su Yi had preferred death over admitting that he was actually innocent of all the charges against him. But these scholars were guilty of plotting a rebellion and that was a crime that should not be pardoned under any circumstances. Otherwise, if other people were to plot a rebellion in future, they could cite this case as an example and request to be pardoned. If that should happen, how could he then explain why the penalty in one case should be different from the other? But it was for the sake of these people that Su Yi had endured immeasurable suffering and humiliation; he had even almost given up his life for them. If this were to be the final outcome of the whole matter and all his efforts had been for naught, how could he possibly endure it? Therefore he hesitated for a long time and was unable to speak.

Suddenly, he heard He Jian submit another petition: "Your Majesty, these scholars were guilty of treason, according to the laws of the land they should be beheaded. But it seems that they genuinely have the desire to repent, therefore this old minister finds the situation awkward and came to request that Your Majesty makes his will known."

He saw that Wanyan Xu's eyes had suddenly brightened at his words and could not help but to think in his heart: *It would seem that Miss Zi Yan really does understand the Emperor very well. She knew that His Majesty would be inclined to pardon these people and with a thousand ways and a hundred plans she managed to find a way out of an embarrassing situation for him.*

As he was ruminating, Zi Yan had already stepped out and kneeling, was presenting a memorial to the Emperor: "Reporting to Your Majesty, by right it is not your humble servant's place to speak too much with regards to important affairs of State, but these scholars are truly remorseful. Besides, our Jin Liao has only just set up her capital in Dou Yan, our foothold in this land is not yet firm and so it is a good time to earn the goodwill of the people. If these people are pardoned, they would surely feel gratitude in their hearts and know that the Emperor is a benevolent and eminent monarch. When they are released in future, they could reasonably be expected to sing Your Majesty's praises to their fellows. As a result, our Jin Liao Empire can be secure forevermore."

This speech of hers could be said to gel perfectly with what Wanyan Xu wished to do, and in addition He Jian who was standing to the side, was also saying considerately: "Miss Zi Yan's words are very true, this old minister hopes that Your Majesty will give them consideration."

The Dragon's heart couldn't help but to be pleased, and he said readily: "If that is the case, and the scholars are truly repentant, then Honourable Minister He should just mete out some light punishment to them and warn them against committing such an act in future." He Jian agreed and retired to carry out Wanyan Xu's instructions.

Zi Yan suddenly walked to the back of the screen and the sound of her speaking was audible to Wanyan Xu. Only then did Wanyan Xu discover that Su Yi was actually at the back of the screen. Just as he was about to speak, he heard his beloved say to Zi Yan happily: "Miss Zi Yan is indeed as good as her word, Su Yi must give much thanks to you." Zi Yan answered in a bland tone of voice: "The Empress's mind can rest easy now. There are still a few high officials who are waiting outside to see the Emperor about some important matters, could the Consort please return to her palace."

Su Yi knew that she adhered to a strict set of rules about hierarchy, therefore he did not see much reason to think further about her request and prepared to leave while being attended to by Zi Nong. At this, Wanyan Xu went up to him and they exchanged a few words before he left, with Wanyan Xu looking after his retreating figure until it disappeared. Then he went back into the study, and sent all the attending eunuchs and palace maids away. After that, Zi Yan and he were the only people who were left in the room. Only then did he turn his attentions to this trusted aide and cherished servant. In a pained voice, he said: "Give me [1] a reason, tell me, why did you do that?"

Zi Yan made no reply, only after a long time passed did she say: "Your humble servant was stupid. With regards to the Empress, I could not stop gauging the heart of a gentleman by the standards of my own petty heart and thus, I could not be at ease knowing that the person who would share a bed and pillows with the Emperor is a Qi national. Your humble servant deserves death."

Wanyan Xu gave a loud roar: "You didn't trust Su Su, but did you not trust me as well? Let's not mention that Su Su is nothing like Daji [2] or Xi Shi [3], but how could you think that I would be like the King of Zhou or Fu Chai. You actually dare to be so bold, you have truly disappointed me."

Zi Yan also did not attempt to justify herself, only caring to kneel and say: "Zi Yan is only waiting for the Emperor and Empress to bestow punishment on her, Zi Yan will bear any punishment with no complaints."

But, in response to her words, she only heard Wanyan Xu give a long sigh before saying: "Why then, did you change your mind? When Yu Cang realised that the truth behind the alleged rebellion of the Empress had been brought to light by the poem which proved that he had been framed, why did he still keep the scholars in the same place thus facilitating my investigation? If it weren't for your assistance, He Jian could never have managed to rescue those scholars so easily. Also, don't think that I do not realise that ever since antiquity, the quality that the intelligentsia prized the most is unflinching righteousness. Since they dared to plot a rebellion in the first place, how is it possible that they will then have a change of heart and repent? Exactly what methods did you employ on them to make them comply?"

Zi Yan said: "Your humble servant does not dare to claim any credit. Your humble servant took advantage of an opportunity which arose to have Young Master Xu smuggled in to join the prisoners. As to how he managed to persuade these people to repent, your humble servant does not know how he managed to accomplish this. As for your question about Honourable Minister Yu, he did indeed have those people transferred to another place, but your humble servant had already anticipated that he would make this move and had ordered people to place the building under heavy surveillance day and night. Thus we could obtain accurate information as to where he moved the captives. He thought that as long as he did not kill those people, the Empress would not dare to tell on him. That was the reason he did not kill them in order to prevent them from divulging his secret but in the end, that gave Honourable Minister He his chance. Your humble servant... did this because Your Majesty's heart has become inextricably tied to him, there is no other reason."

Wanyan Xu glared at her with eyes that were filled with both fury and heartache. After a long time, he suddenly waved his hand and said: "You deceived your monarch, offended your superiors and framed the Empress. Your crime is great, the evil you committed is extreme. Taking into account your long service to me and also that you have now repented, I will bestow upon you the privilege of dying with a whole corpse, you... you shall go now... and put an end to yourself." With that, he turned his back to her and made to leave, his tiger eyes [4] were shimmering with tears and he could not bear to look at his beloved servant any longer.

As for Zi Yan, she remained eerily calm. She stood up but then again knelt down to do homage, after knocking her head a few times she said quietly: "Your humble servant shall take her leave now, during the time of wind and frosts in the coming years, I hope that Your Majesty will take care of his Dragon Body." With that, she stood up but just as she had turned to go, suddenly a clear and bright-toned voice was heard. It said: "Wait a moment, don't tell me that Miss Zi Yan has forgotten? You once said that if I should have the fortune to occupy the position of Empress again, your end would be decided by me."

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Wanyan Xu and Zi Yan both jumped in fright, not knowing when or why Su Yi had returned after they had seen him leave. They turned, only to see Su Yi step out from behind the screen, with Zi Nong lending him an arm for support. When he saw Wanyan Xu, he gave a "humph" before saying in a displeased manner: "You muddle-headed thing, don't tell me that you will pay no mind to jurisprudence and care for nothing else but your personal feelings? To think that you cannot adjust even a little to accommodate changing circumstances. You can even treat your beloved servant so harshly, even when she did not commit any great crime in the final reckoning."

Wanyan Xu was rendered speechless, but he thought in his heart: *Su Su, these words are really laughable. If even framing the Empress of treason is not considered to be a great crime, then what can be considered to be a great crime?* He knew that in his heart, Su Yi wished to save Zi Yan and so after thinking a while he said: "Su Su why have you returned here? Your body is still weak, you should go back to the palace and concentrate on recuperating, leave this matter to for me to handle."

Su Yi smiled and said: "If I insist on opposing your decision right here, I'm afraid that Miss Zi Yan will feel even unhappier in her heart, feeling that I really can exercise some magic to confuse and dominate the sagacious intellect. But there must be an axiom to everything, and so here I must do something that will arouse her suspicions and invite her derision. Besides, she also once said that if I were to become the

Empress again, no matter what I do to her, she will not protest.”

So saying, he walked in front of her and said: “I know that you are a woman that has a character tempered by iron, and there are many things that you do not wish for me to know, in case I should think that you are trying to ingratiate yourself with me. But how could I not have thought of them myself? Shuo Er is but a child, it is hardly likely that he would suddenly think of examining that poem for a clue. Not to mention that the clue was so subtle that even I failed to notice it so how could he have unravelled the puzzle in mere moments? Besides, if it weren't for Miss's assistance, how would Honourable Minister He have discovered in such a timely fashion that General Yu had captured those scholars and were using them as collateral? Not to mention, he then managed to find them so rapidly. You had me come and listen in because you wanted to release me from my doubts. At first, I was so glad that I did not think much further. But as I was on the way back to the palace, the more I puzzled over the whole affair, the more I felt that something was off. Wanyan had not yet dismissed me, so why would you be in a hurry to have me leave? You are a person who has always carried deep reverence for your master in your heart, therefore you would not easily commit this deeply disrespectful transgression. I know that you do not wish to be indebted to me but although your master is indeed brilliant, he still needs to have capable assistants such as you. Could you really bear to abandon him? If you are going to say that he could just retrain another person, it would take countless years.”

Zi Yan made no reply. Only after a long time did she suddenly look up and said forthrightly: “Since the consort knows Zi Yan's mind, then you should know that your good intentions are wasted on me. I was the cause of all the bitterness and suffering you endured, even if you don't hold the past against me, Zi Yan also does not have the face to receive the Empress's benediction.”

Her voice had just faded when Zi Nong had stamped her foot anxiously and said: “Zi Yan, why are you doing this, don't tell me...”

Before she could finish, Zi Yan's severe eyes had shifted to her and she said gravely: “Zi Nong, we the four sisters have grown up together, you should understand what sort of person I am.” So saying, she knelt in front of Su Yi and said:

“Zi Yan has given the Consort much cause for offence in the past, I hope that the great man will show his magnanimity. If the Consort will henceforth be dedicated to assisting the Emperor, then Zi Yan will leave this life with no regrets.”

In his heart Su Yi knew that this servant girl was really too proud to accept any mercy from him, and trying to persuade her with kind words was a tactic that was doomed to failure. He rolled his eyes, and a new idea took hold in his heart. He gave a cold laugh and said: “Your courage is really commendable, as is your unflinching integrity. In addition, you are willing to take responsibility for your actions. But the mortal world is such that in all likelihood, out of every ten matters, at least eight or nine would not go according to one's wish, so how could you expect to be the exception and that things will go exactly to your wishes? Wanyan Xu and Zi Nong both know that previously, I had similarly wished for death so that I could be a martyr for my country, but what was the result? And now, you also wish for death as a way to atone for your crime. Humph humph, how can things be so easy? Since your end is to be decided by me, then I want you to continue living and you will atone for your crimes with the good deeds that you shall do from now until the day of your death. You don't have to think that I am being good-hearted and you do not need to feel indebted to me. To tell you the truth, this is my way of taking revenge. I have endured a lot of suffering and humiliation, if the only compensation I receive is to be an easy death for you, then how could the rage in my heart be quelled?” So saying, he looked at Wanyan Xu and said: “This is what I want, so that I can vent my anger. What is your opinion on this?”

Just by looking at his expression, Wanyan Xu could tell that Su Yi was determined to protect Zi Yan. His own heart was already loathe to part with his beloved servant and besides, since the victim of the crime had already made his will known, he really did not need to be inflexible anymore and insist on executing Zi Yan. Therefore he smiled and said: “Since the injured party has stated his wishes, how can I have any further comments. This insolent servant had inflicted so much pain upon you, she should be yours to deal with as you see fit anyway.” With that said, he turned to Zi Yan and continued speaking: “have you heard that? You should thank the Empress for his benevolence. In future, you have to do more good deeds to bring good fortune to him so as to redeem yourself.”

At this verdict, a smile had immediately brightened Zi Nong's face but Zi Yan could only thank Su Yi grudgingly before she took her leave and left. Zi Nong could not help but laugh before saying: "The Consort need not mind her. Among the four of us, she is the most contrary. Although her actions are ruthless at times, she does not actually have a wicked nature. Don't jump to conclusions solely because her face did not show any feelings of gratitude just now; actually in her heart she knows how to distinguish between good and bad outcomes."

Su Yi smiled and said: "I am not trying to get her to feel gratitude towards me; I just think that although this girl is somewhat too prideful, she is also a person who is driven by her convictions. Moreover, she had told me long before that if I were to become a member of the Inner Court, she would definitely find a way to deal with me. From that, we can see that she clearly has a very candid character. In comparison to those people who plot against others on the sly, she is much more respectable. Humph humph." With that, he looked at his beloved and Wanyan Xu immediately understood that he was thinking of that old score he had incurred long ago in the old Jin Liao Palace. Quickly, he dodged the accusation by giving a few "heh heh" laughs.

Suddenly, they heard someone call from beyond the chamber that He Jian was seeking an audience. Wanyan Xu furrowed his brows and said: "He just retired a short while ago, why is he suddenly requesting an audience again? Oh well, it must surely be that there has been some new developments in this case, let's listen to what he has to say." He had actually intended to sit down while holding Su Yi, but Su Yi managed to dodge and in a flash he was once again hiding at the back of the screen with Zi Nong.

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Soon after, He Jian entered into the room, after he had paid homage to the Imperial personages in the room he said: "Reporting to Your Majesty, The guard we had apprehended who was in charge of securing the scholars is still refusing to make a confession but the scholars themselves have already told us the truth. They have confirmed that Honourable Minister Yu was behind the plot to frame the Empress; they even said that Honourable Minister Yu had personally led the operation to capture them. To prevent word from leaking out, he only brought along a few trusted aides. Although the number of scholars outnumbered them by many counts, they were all physically very weak and thus were helpless when faced with men who were well-versed in martial arts and were easily captured. Because General Yu has an elevated status, so this old minister has come to ask for Your Majesty's instructions. Does Your Majesty wish to have the General arrested and brought in for questioning?"

Wanyan Xu said: "Why did those scholars only speak up now? Is there any possibility that they are making a false statement?"

He Jian bowed and said: "This is an oversight of this old minister, I had concentrated all my efforts towards the man guarding the scholars and only thought of questioning the scholars when I returned to the ministry after our earlier audience. This old minister has questioned them separately and their stories corroborated each other's. Therefore I can confidently say that I do not suspect them of collusion."

In actual fact, Wanyan Xu had only tossed out the question casually. Zi Yan had already told him about everything; there could be no doubt about Yu Cang's involvement. For a long time, the only sound from him was a long "hmmm" as he pondered before issuing his command: "Even when the Son of Heaven has committed a crime, his punishment should be the same as that meted out to the common man. Besides, he is only a general. When my [1] own Empress was framed by him, did he not also have to endure suffering that was unprecedented in his life? For the Honourable Minister He to seek advice on this matter, he is being overly cautious. On well, it doesn't matter since you have already come. That Yu Cang is

still invested with military authority at the moment, I think that the guards in his manor would surely be difficult to deal with. I will give you a secret Imperial Decree now, you are to go in all haste to find the Minister Lin Ye, who is in charge of the Ministry of War and show it to him. Yu Cang must be captured in one fell swoop.”

So it transpired that Wanyan Xu had been very cautious when it came to administering his Empire. Military power in the realm had been divided into three portions --- big, medium and small. He had personally assumed control of the largest share. Although Yu Cang was an enemy general who had surrendered and then switched his loyalties, he had proven himself by accomplishing exceptionally meritorious deeds in the service of Jin Liao time and again. Therefore he had been awarded the medium portion of military power. As for the Minister of War Lin Ye, he controlled the smallest share. However the troops that were part of Yu Cang's command were largely stationed outside the capital, therefore even though it was Lin Ye's small portion of military command that was dispatched to capture Yu Cang, the force at their disposal was more than enough to accomplish their goal.

After He Jian had received the edict, he left to carry out Wanyan Xu's instructions, leaving Wanyan Xu to pace around the Imperial Study as he silently stewed in his anger. He was thinking to himself that he had always treated Yu Cang with generosity and Su Yi had never been in conflict with him so why should he have such rapacious designs? Suddenly he remembered that on the day all it all went down, Wanyan Shuo had been deeply mistrustful of Yu Cang's intentions. Could it be that he was privy to some insider information? Thinking of this, he quickly sent somebody to summon the Crown Prince.

The Inner Court attendant that he had sent on this errand soon came back to make a report: “His Highness the Crown Prince is currently reading in the residence of the Second Prince. He asked your humble servant the reason for his summons, and your humble servant told him. He then instructed your humble servant to come back and relay this message to the Emperor. He said that there was only one reason for Yu Cang to harm the Empress. That is, he was jealous that the Empress Consort was unyielding unto death and faced with the same situation, he had been much more heroic than Yu Cang had been. On the day of the grand wedding ceremony, he

had also been disrespectful of the Consort because of this.”

Only then did Wanyan Xu suddenly see the light. He couldn't help but to feel roaring anger, banging his fist on the table in rage he said: “For such a grand general, he could actually be so narrow-minded. This is really too appalling.” Suddenly he saw Su Yi stepping out from behind the screen wearing an expression that showed traces of compassion. In his heart, he knew that once again, his beloved's natural inclination towards excessive clemency had been triggered and he now wished to save Yu Cang. At first, he wanted to reject the idea decisively without giving Su Yi even a chance to speak but on further thought, he was afraid that he would end up feeling sympathy with a like-minded [2] person who is in distress. Of course, it was unavoidable that Wanyan Xu would want to ease Su Yi's anxieties as much as possible. Hence, he dismissed all the servants before saying gently: “Su Su, what do you have to say this time?”

Sure enough, Su Yi said haltingly: “Wanyan, I think... is it not possible that on account of General Yu's... on account of his service... to spare him...” Before he could finish, he had been interrupted by a wave of Wanyan Xu's hand and heard him say in a grave tone of voice: “Even if he has rendered service that is as high as the heavens, it would be difficult to make up for the sin he has committed this time.”

With a face that was full of sorrow, he sighed and said: “A defeated enemy general is still a defeated enemy general in the end.”

Wanyan Xu thought in his heart: *it is just as I had thought*. Hurriedly he grabbed his lover in a hug and a long time passed before he said in a low voice: “Su Su, I consider you to be my closest confidant, don't tell me that actually, you still don't understand me? Although Yu Cang is a surrendered enemy general, I have never treated him as such. His rank is high and his position is glorified. Not to mention, I have entrusted him with important missions numerous times. I have never had the slightest misgivings about him just because he is a surrendered enemy general. But this person is really petty, he developed malice towards you just because of your unflinching loyalty. In the final analysis, the person that minded his status as a surrendered general was him. Even more grievously, he dared to frame you even

though you have become my Empress. This is a monstrous crime that deserves the punishment of having one's family exterminated. If I were to execute just him, it is already to be considered a mercy that oversteps the boundaries of law. If I do not execute him, then how can the laws and decrees of Jin Liao be taken seriously and also, how could I account for my failing to the courtiers and the common people? Furthermore, if we are to consider his selfishness, since Yu Cang dares to frame the Empress today, in future he will also be capable of causing harm to other courtiers who do not submit to him. To leave a man like him among the Imperial Court will only cause internal strife and chaos but if we were to release him to roam the world of martial artists, he would still be resentful and it is inevitable that he would attempt to effect a rebellion. Therefore no matter how I look at it, he must die." After having said all this, he could not but but to give a heavy sigh. Embracing Su Yi tightly, he said: "Su Su, do you understand what is in my heart now?"

Su Yi remained silent but after a long time, he returned Wanyan Xu's embrace and said sadly: "I understand."

The two people were finally on the same page and feeling more sweet affection for the other. Just when they were relishing the taste of this congenial atmosphere, suddenly, they heard an Inner Court Attendant make a report: "Reporting to the Emperor and Empress, Honourable Minister He has sent someone to make this report: early this morning, General Yu had already committed suicide by hanging himself in his manor."

Wanyan Su and Su Yi exchanged a look. Both of them were greatly shocked, both of them had thought that with Yu Cang's skill in martial arts he would either manage to escape, or he would give a good battle before he gave up his life. Suddenly Wanyan Xu was heard to give a long laugh and say: "Good, good, he has proven to be a minister worthy of me. Although many of his words and deeds were shameful, in the end he still cannot be regarded as just a lowly rat; he has not lost the inherent courage of a real man." So saying, he turned his head towards the attendant and said: "Send down this edict. Yu Cang has paid for his crime with his life, on account of his outstanding military service and brilliant feats on the battlefield in the service of Jin Liao, his family will be allowed to bury him with a whole corpse."

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With that, the convoluted and scandalous case of the Empress who had been framed finally came to a close and Su Yi had finally come to the end of his trials. As for Wanyan Xu, the lingering sadness in his heart aside, he was still feeling endless guilt and self-recrimination and Su Yi often had to ease his anxieties before he could even smile.

On this day, the weather was sunny and cloudless. When Wanyan Xu arrived at the Garden of Merriment after holding court, he found that Su Yi was nowhere to be found. After questioning a palace maid, he learned that Su Yi was with the Empress Dowager in the Pavilion [1] of Cold Frosts, drinking tea and playing the flute. At that, he hurried off to join them. However, before he was even near to the pavilion, a mellifluous tune that came from a flute wafted by his ears. The sound was clear and distinct as if it had circumvented the trees and pierced through the clouds. He halted his steps and listened closely to the song and found that it was actually a common tune. But somehow, although it was extremely moving, it could not hold a candle to the tune that Su Yi had played in the Plum Blossom Grove on that winter's day. Therefore he walked inside the building and said smilingly: "Although this song is also enjoyable, it still pales in comparison with the composition you played that day in the hall set among the red plum blossoms. Su Su, it's better if you play that one again for me [2] to listen to."

Su Yi smiled and said: "On that day, a hundred different feelings were mingling in my heart, which was the reason I was able to channel my emotions into the music. But today, since I don't have the same feelings anymore, if I were to force myself to play that tune, it would also be insipid. Not to mention, that song is very intense, it doesn't match the joyful scene that is in front of our eyes now, making it feel even more tedious to play."

The Empress Dowager smiled and said: "Just now, I [3] had wanted him to play that tune too, but he said the same thing. From that, we can tell that it is really an

awkward request.”

Before she could speak further, Zi Nong, who was standing by the side, laughingly said: “Naturally, it is a difficult request to fulfill. At that time Young Master had been wrongly condemned and was being subjected to injustice, his heart must have been full of grief and indignation. Today, his heart is full of honey-like sweetness; of course he cannot play that tune.”

When she had finished, the Empress Dowager as well as all the attending palace maids and eunuchs had all broken into big smiles and were obliged to hide them behind their sleeves. Only, Su Yi and Wanyan Xu were left with faces that were flushed a brilliant scarlet. Wanyan Xu pretended to be offended and scolded: “Zi Nong is getting bolder and bolder, she even dares to make fun of Su Su and me.” And then he said to Su Yi: “It’s all because you have been spoiling her consistently. Originally, she was already not someone who is easy to deal with and now she is even more undisciplined and out of control.”

Su Yi gave a “humph” and said: “You also know that even from the start she was already not someone who is easy to deal with? How many days has she been with me? If she hadn’t been used to conducting herself in an unbridled fashion while serving you, would she be so bold now? Don’t go pushing all the blame on to me.”

His speech left Wanyan Xu with no way to make a riposte. When everybody saw that the day had come when someone got the better of this aloof Emperor --- who always said one thing and meant just that --- they could not help but to find the joke even funnier. Even Zi Yan could not help but to wear a genuine smile upon her face, thinking in her heart: *Truly, there is a rock to every scissor, a scissor to every paper and a paper to every rock. If I had not had the opportunity to spend so many days in his company and come to understand what sort of person he is, I think I would still not dare to let him be by His Majesty's side.*

As the coterie of people carried on chatting and laughing, a few palace maids delivered some freshly made snacks from the Imperial Kitchen. At that, the Empress Dowager asked: “Why do we not see Shuo Er here, isn’t spending time with his

Empress Mother his favourite thing to do?”

Wanyan Xu laughed and said: “I think he must be working on his lessons.” With that said, he hugged Su Yi close, not caring at all that they were in the presence of others. He said: “Speaking of this, I must give you my full admiration. Previously nobody in the entire palace, including myself, could make him sit still and devote himself to reading. But you do have this ability; truly you are worthy of being called my good wife.”

Su Yi quickly pushed him away and said: “It is because Shuo Er is becoming more sensible, I do not dare to take credit for his transformation.” He did not have time to say anything else; a cheerful and lively voice could be heard coming from outside: “But it is really due to Mother Empress's efforts, so why don't you dare to claim credit? Are you afraid that should you receive recognition for this meritorious deed, Imperial Father will really give you much thanks?” Only Wanyan Xu and Su Yi understood the double entendre that he was making, everybody else failed to detect the suggestive undertones hidden in his words. At once, the two of them were both embarrassed and annoyed, but they could not do anything with this little fellow.

And so, they had their lunch sent to the Pavilion of Cold Frosts and after their meal they went back to the Garden of Merriment only to find that Wanyan Xia had been waiting in the reception hall for quite a while. When he saw that they were back, he stood up and said: “You all are still so happy. Are we still going to treat the leg or not?”

Wanyan Xu was overjoyed. Rushing over, he said: “Treat it, naturally we are going to treat it. But didn't you say that you still needed a few more days before you can come up with a plan that was absolutely certain to be successful?”

Wanyan Xia said: “There's no need to wait any longer, the plan has been drawn up. But as I told you before, this medicine is extremely potent. Once you have started taking it, you have to stick with it till the end. Su Yi, I am not doubting your toughness, but are you sure that you will persevere till the end?”

Not answering the question, Su Yi instead asked Wanyan Xia: “How is the rabbit that you used as a test subject? Did it die of pain?”

Wanyan Xia could not help but to let a slight smile show on his otherwise impassive face. He said: “No, in fact it has been feeding so well that it has gotten very fat and there are no indications that there are any lingering problems.”

Su Yi smiled and said: “There you have it, even a little rabbit did not die of pain. Even if there is some pain, how bad can it be? Besides, it is to heal a crippled leg. By itself, that is already to be considered a miraculous feat, it is only right that there should be some sacrifices required to achieve this.”

Wanyan Xia nodded and said: “Since you have said that, then let's begin the course of treatment today. In antiquity, Guan Yu talked cheerfully and wittily while Hua Tuo scraped the poison off of his bones [4]. I think your resilience will not be much less than Lord Guan's, but I fear that there is somebody else who cannot bear it...” He look at Wanyan Xu and suddenly gave a mischievous smile and said: “You have to understand, the wound is on your body, but the pain is in somebody else's heart.”

Wanyan Xu could only give a stiff smile. When he heard Wanyan Xia say that the treatment would be so painful, he had indeed began to worry and fret in his heart. Looking into Su Yi's smiling eyes, he knew that his beloved was really unafraid. But as for him, he was afraid, very afraid. Just the very thought of his Su Su having to undergo untold depths of torment made him so afraid that his heart felt like it was seizing up. Why, why was it that even now Su Su still had to endure such suffering when obviously... obviously the one who should have to suffer and endure punishment should be Wanyan Xu himself... it should be himself. With complex feelings of unease, distress, guilt and heartache, he went along as Su Yi and Wanyan Xia proceeded into the inner room.

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After the medicine had been applied, Su Yi and Wanyan Xu looked at the translucent-looking ointment, already beginning to be absorbed into the skin of Su Yi's crippled leg, which was already showing some signs of atrophy from disuse. They really could not dare to believe that with just this seemingly simple method of treatment, Su Yi's leg could make a complete recovery.

"Su Su, does it hurt?" Wanyan Xu asked anxiously. Judging from the force with which he was clutching Su Yi's arm, it would seem that he was actually the one who the ointment had been applied to and he was now in deathly pain.

"It does not." Su Yi patted his lover's arm in a comforting manner. In his heart, he had already made a firm resolution --- no matter how painful it was going to get, he was going to act normally, as if nothing much was happening to him. Just from looking at Wanyan Xu's expression, he could tell that his nerves had been stretched to the breaking point, he was unlikely to be able to sustain more setbacks.

"How could that be? Xia Er said that it would be extremely painful. Wanyan Xu clumsily stroked Su Yi's broken leg, which had been wrapped with ointment, trying to convince himself that he could help to alleviate some of Su Yi's pain with this action.

But then, he heard Wanyan Xia say blandly: "It's of no use, it has not begun to ache. But after the passing of an hour, even if you were to cut his flesh with a knife, he would not even notice that pain in comparison to the pain caused by the medicine." He saw that Wanyan Xu's face had immediately blanched upon hearing his words and after giving a "humph", he said: "You're not the one who has to suffer, how come you are even more afraid than Su Yi?" These words were meant to be consoling, but instead, he saw that Wanyan Xu's eyes had immediately reddened. Looking at this younger brother --- in name, if nothing else --- he said loudly: "I [1] would rather that I am the one, that I am the one with a broken leg and I am the one who has to suffer this pain."

Wanyan Xia was silent, thinking of that day he had come to beg Wanyan Xia to save

Su Yi. His legs had almost become crippled from kneeling in the snow for so long, but he had paid no mind to that, fearing only that any delays in leading him to Su Yi would result in him refusing to treat Su Yi. With that he muttered softly to himself: “What is this thing called love, why does it have the power to make people promise to be together in life and death? [2]” After that, he picked up his chest of medical supplies and began to leave.

Suddenly, he heard Su Yi's calling for him from behind. Wanyan Xia turned back to look, and heard Su Yi say with a soft but solemn voice: “Hold off Shuo Er, don't let him come here.” In his heart understood Su Yi's intentions and after a long while he nodded and said: “I'll do my best.” So saying, he walked out of the room. The only other person left in the room was Wanyan Xu, who stared at Su Yi unblinkingly, alert for even the slightest bit of reaction coming from Su Yi.

Gradually, Su Yi began to feel the effects of the medicine on his leg. Although it was indeed very painful, the sensation was actually the basis for some gladness in Su Yi's heart. For a long time, he had not had any feeling below his knee. Now, he was suddenly able to feel pain there again. Although the intensity of the pain was getting more and more intolerable, for him it was actually a very blessed thing.

“Is it starting to hurt?” Unwilling to overlook even the slightest hint of a difference in expression on Su Yi's face, Wanyan Xu very easily perceived the changes in his beloved. He helplessly caressed that broken leg with a trembling hand, while muttering almost to himself: “What shall we do? Su Su? Are you in a lot of pain? What... what do you want to do? Su Su... do you wish to eat anything? Or do you wish to drink some soup... Why don't we send of some musicians and dancers to entertain us?”

The waves of pain that were coursing over the area around his knees were getting larger and larger. Su Yi forced himself to endure them and clasping Wanyan Xu's hand, stubbornly said in a calm voice: “It doesn't matter. Wanyan, it is not as difficult to bear as Xia Er described. Aren't there any more memorials that require your attention in the Imperial Study? It is better if you go and evaluate them.”

He saw that the other party looked like he had not heard anything he said and was still massaging his leg futilely. Finally he could bear it no more. With a firm grasp, he pulled Wanyan Xu's hand from his leg and shouted: "Wanyan Xu, look at me. Don't look at my leg, look into my eyes. Listen seriously to me, alright?"

Wanyan Xu had been so anxious that he had almost lost control of his emotions but with Su Yi's sudden roar, he was startled back into his normal frame of mind. At a loss, he stared looked at Su Yi's earnest expression and heard him say seriously: "Wanyan Xu, don't be like this, do you know how ridiculous you look at the moment? You are not recognisable as yourself now, do you know that? Wanyan, the person I like is that ruler who capably governs all under heaven, who is full of mettle, the Wanyan Xu who would not change for anything or anyone. It is that great hero who would never panic even when met with myriad changes, who would have no fear even when he's facing death. I do not wish to see him reduced to looking so helpless and cowardly. Even if it is because of me, even if it is because he is concerned about me, even if it is indeed true that he is powerless to prevent this broken leg from giving me pain, I still wish to see that he is still able to maintain a calm and collected frame of mind. Wanyan, if you like me, then you should sit by my side and tell me that you will be with me as we conquer this obstacle together. You should not let me see you looking as if you are at a total loss, not knowing what to do. Oh Wanyan, my leg is already causing me a lot of pain; it is very difficult to endure. Since that is unavoidable, please do not let me have to endure immeasurable pain in my heart as well, alright?"

Wanyan Xu looked into Su Yi's eyes; with these few simple sentences Su Yi had already amply expressed his own feelings for Wanyan Xu. Suddenly he grabbed his beloved in a tight embrace, not allowing him to see the tears gathered in his eyes that Wanyan Xu was about to lose control over. He stroked his beloved's head of fine black hair, as he replied, saying each word clearly and meaning them with all his heart: "That's right, Su Su, we shall endure this together. We shall witness together every little step in the process that will allow you to walk normally once again."

"This is more like the man that I, Su Yi have chosen." Su Yi smiled at him comfortingly. Very good, Wanyan... He had finally managed to emerge from the

shadow that had been cast over him by his feelings of guilt and regret. With that thought, even the pain that had gradually penetrated into the very marrow of his bones seemingly relented in its intensity. He rested his head on his lover's broad shoulder, revelling in that unique and unmatched feeling of ease, he muttered: "Just like this, Wanyan, let me lean on you. I'll sleep for a while leaning on you, I like... you holding me like this..." He did not need to say the rest of his words, his head gradually drooped down into Wanyan Xu's embrace and Su Yi closed his eyes blissfully. A few beads of sweat slipped off his forehead, passing by his relaxed brows, his cheeks that were graced with a smile and the corner of his mouth, which were slightly upturned. Finally, it fell onto the red carpet that lined the floor of the room and dissipated without a trace.

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At night, the wind blew in strong gusts from the north, and gradually, pearls of snow began to drift down from the heavens. All of the palace maids and eunuchs in the palace had already withdrawn to have a rest, except for those who were dancing attendance upon their masters. In the entire sprawling palace complex, only a few lights were still shining and there was not a sound to be heard. For the denizens of the palace, this was a good night to delight in the joys to be found between their bed covers.

Wanyan Xu watched over Su Yi from the front of the bed, carefully wiping away the droplets of perspiration that rolled down his forehead. The fire of impatience burned in his heart, the pain had already been going on for several hours, but still, it did not seem to be showing any signs of abating.

"Su Su, if you are in pain then just shout out. You can cry out, you do not need to hold back for my [1] sake. You need not worry, I will not turn back into the cowardly man you saw previously, you... you should cry out." He embraced Su Yi, careful to shift him into the most comfortable position possible. The hands of the two people were entwined and as was normal at such times, the two of them became each

other's pillar on which they could lean for support.

"Doesn't... doesn't matter, it is not... that painful, you... should not believe what Xia Er said." Su Yi gritted his teeth and endured the pain, managing to force out a gentle smile with an effort. He gave his beloved's stiff hand a couple of squeezes, offering comfort and said: "Wanyan... Do you know? At his moment I am... not thinking of the pain, I am thinking of another matter..." He lifted up the hands that they had clasped together and said: "You.... When you see this... what do you think of?"

Wanyan Xu remained silent, after a long time passed, Su Yi gave a laugh and said: "You actually don't know? Really... really so dim..." Before he could finish speaking, Wanyan Xu had planted a gentle kiss on his forehead and said: "How could I not know what you are speaking of, Su Su, how could I not know? I will be holding your hand, and growing old together with you, till death do us part..." Before he could finish speaking, a tear fell from his eye and coincidentally, it landed on Su yi's lip. He buried his head against the Su Yi's neck and said: "Yes... yes, Su Su, we shall remain together just like this, until we both grow old. As long as I live, I shall never let you down; you also... you also must not forget our pact to be together as our hair turns white."

Su Yi had originally intended to soothe Wanyan Xu, but he could not have guessed that he would be moved to the point of tears instead. Although Su Yi also felt himself to be overwhelmed with emotions, but still, he had to fight back his own tears and said smilingly: "Look at you, that is such a cloying saying. That I should remember it at this time, even if you do not laugh at me for being unoriginal, you still don't need to be moved to this state. The two of us have come so far together, actually is it still necessary to say these words at this point?" He thought a while and suddenly gave Wanyan Xu a kiss on his cheek and said softly: "May it be that my lord's heart is the same as mine, surely then our yearning will not meet with disappointment."

Su Yi had always been taciturn and self-reliant; time and again, he had put up barriers against Wanyan Xu. Although he had once professed his love for him, it had been because he had been sure that he was going to die and therefore he had allowed himself to lay bare his true feelings effusively. But it was only that one time;

he had never done so again. Now that he was suddenly saying endearments that were imbued with love that was as deep as the ocean, how could Wanyan Xu not be overwhelmed by such favour shown by a superior being? He could not contain himself, in excitement he grabbed Su Yi in a hug while murmuring: "May it be that my lord's heart is the same as mine, surely then our yearning will not meet with disappointment ..."

Su Yi lifted up his free hand, preventing him from musing anymore on those bewitching words. He smiled and said: "It is late, you still have to attend court early in the morning tomorrow. Go to sleep, the pain will lessen in a while and I would also want to sleep then."

Wanyan Xu said: "Tomorrow's court shall be cancelled. I shall be with you during this period of medical treatment. It will not be for long anyway, I want to be with you for every moment..." He did not manage to finish before Su Yi sternly interrupted: "What is this? Don't tell me you wish for Miss Zi Yan's worries to become a reality? Or do you think that I will rejoice in being able to become a sinner that can cause 'from that time onwards, the monarch never attended morning court' [2]. You are not to say that kind of thing again, otherwise I will not bother with you anymore, I'll go back to my home and be a farmer instead."

Wanyan Xu hurriedly said a few "yes" fervently, but he couldn't help but to smile and say: "Su Su, you entered into official service in your youth and you spent your childhood studying the literary classics and martial arts. Go home and be a farmer? Do you know how?" At these words, even Su Yi could not hide his laugh behind his palm and he said petulantly: "Even if I don't know how to farm, don't tell me that you think that I also do not know how to teach? Becoming a teacher is not bad either."

Wanyan Xu nodded and said: "That is indeed a very appropriate occupation for you. Just look at how you have been able to instil obedience in Shuo Er, could there still be a more mischievous pupil than him in all the lands under heaven?" After he said that, he saw that Su Yi did indeed look tired. Only then did he give the command to have the candles put out and they went to sleep, while holding each other. The pale moonlight came in from the windows and shone upon them like a subtle veil,

cocooning them in its gentle glow.

With his mind occupied by thoughts of the pain in Su Yi's leg, how could Wanyan Xu fall asleep? Because he had been taking care of Su Yi over the past few days, he had already developed the habit of sleeping lightly, waking up from time to time to check over his beloved. Su Yi knew that he had not been sleeping well, and afraid that he would have to delay court in the morning because he did not get enough rest, Su Yi had to resort to clenching his teeth and pretending that he was already soundly asleep. He could not tell how much time passed before he finally felt that Wanyan Xu's breathing had become even. Only then did he open his eyes and carefully removed his hand. In the very next moment, he was tearing at his own skin. What Wanyan Xia said had been correct, this medicine was indeed devastatingly potent. Although he was tearing at his leg, the pain did not reduce at all but he still did not dare to make a single sound.

Desperately, he struggled to deal with the pain by himself. Although he had already bitten his lips bloody, he did not seem to feel it at all. With his eyes squeezed shut, he panted, while taking care to not make any noise. Suddenly his mouth was pried open gently and something that felt soft and full of elasticity was put into it. At the moment he was in excruciating pain, with no time to think, his upper and lower teeth reflexively clamped together and he bit down upon that thing. In the twinkling of an eye, the distinctive taste of blood assaulted his tongue. In shock, he opened his eyes, only to see that Wanyan Xu was looking at him gently. The thing that Su Yi was biting down on was none other than his arm and a trickle of blood was meandering slowly along the bronzed skin to drip down the length of his arm.

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Su Yi's shock was extraordinary in its intensity. He quickly let go and said in distress: "You've gone mad, what do you think you're doing? His spirits were so highly agitated that he actually forgot about the pain in his body and instead he was busy with lifting Wanyan Xu's arm and checking it over for injury. Zi Nong and the rest had also been startled awake by Su Yi's cry and when they came in to have a look, they

could not help but to panic as well. Wanyan Xu quickly said: "Hush, there's no point in alarming everyone into waking up. Zi Nong, you can go back to sleep, I [1] can handle things from here."

After Zi Nong had left, he hugged Su Yi, who was still wearing a look of panic on his face, close and said: "Look at you, you were scolding me, but how come you have also lost your head in panic at this time?" So saying, he held Su Yi's body upright, looking into his eyes, he forced a smile and said: "Su Su, I said before that if you are in pain, I will accompany you in pain. Did you think that if you deliberately pretended to sleep, I will not know that you are actually hurting? No matter how good you are at disguise, could you really hide from me the fact that cold sweat that is covering your body time and again? I was only pretending to sleep because I was worried that you were forcing yourself to appear normal because you were afraid of causing me distress. Sure enough, you soon showed your hand."

Su Yi found that he had no answer for Wanyan Xu. Although the pain had increased by a few degrees again, he was still afraid that Wanyan Xu would be anxious and he could only say: "You now should make the same effort as I did into not letting you worry. You still said that you would treat me with honesty. Be sensible and go to sleep, that way I can also stop worrying. Even though it hurts, how bad can it get?" Although his lips were saying these words, his leg had already started giving a few uncontrollable trembles. He could not help but to smile bitterly and say: "So it seems, I am really not the equal of Lord Guan, who could still joke happily as poison was being scraped off his bones. This pain should be nothing in comparison, but I am already feeling so uncomfortable."

Wanyan Xu took exception to his statement and said: "Not so, that is merely a story that was made up. There is no one who could verify that tale [2]. Even if it is true, how do you know that the pain he had to endure was worse than yours, perhaps it was actually much less intense than the pain in your leg." So saying, he raised his arm to Su Yi's lips again, and said solemnly: "Su Su, bite on me. You have been biting so hard on your lips, have you seen the state they are in now?"

Su Yi hurriedly pushed his arm away and said in frustration: "It that is so, then have

somebody fetch a towel for me to bite down on. I won't force myself to suffer in silence anymore; this is really an incomparably powerful medicine." He was in such pain that he again had to gasp a few times, but he saw that Wanyan Xu was remaining silent. Just as he was feeling surprised, he suddenly heard him say sincerely: "Su Su, do you know something? If you bite me, and let me share in your pain, my heart would actually feel a little more comfortable, otherwise... otherwise, do you understand how miserable my heart feels?"

Su Yi gave a sigh and said with a slight smile: "If I were to bite you, then how would my heart feel? You are thinking of yourself and not of me..." Before he could finish, suddenly, he saw Wanyan Xu tug viciously on his own hair as he shouted loudly: "That's not right, not right, Su Su, you don't understand my feelings. Do you know? Your leg is broken because of me, I was the one who ordered people to hit you." He saw that Su Yi was quickly gearing up to refute his claim, and hurriedly he covered his mouth and said with pain: "Please let me finish. Yes, you can help me find a thousand reasons to say that this had nothing to do with me. But what use is that? I understand the situation clearly in my heart. At that time, if I did not jump to conclusions if I could investigate this case carefully, perhaps none of this would have happened and you would not need to suffer like this. Every time I think of this, my heart would feel as if it is being tossed around in a vat of boiling oil."

Su Yi's heart also began to throb in pain --- to think that such a domineering man would have taken this matter to heart so much that he was still unable to get over it. Feeling guilty, he hugged Wanyan Xu and said softly: "It was my own choice, to save those scholars, I did not take you or Shuo Er into consideration, and confessed to the crime. Wanyan, actually I am the one who let you down..." Suddenly, he felt his waist being clutched tightly and he heard Wanyan Xu say despairingly: "But my heart aches. Regardless of who is to blame, I feel as though my heart is dripping with blood from lacerations. Su Su, this pain.... cannot be dispelled ah."

Su Yi was silent for a long time before he suddenly grabbed his beloved's arm and said tearfully: "If... if this is the only way to alleviate your anguish, well, what will I not do for you? Wanyan..." With that abruptly he bit down, and the remaining words that he did not know how to say remained lodged in his throat.

On this late night, even the splendid beauty of the Garden of Merriment could not conceal the fact that behind the muslin canopy of the bed the two people were both being tormented by pain. Even more so, it could not conceal that even in the midst of their suffering, the two hearts were beating as one, communicating their deep affection towards the other. Truly it was “hand in hand, eyes locked on eyes, words stay frozen in my mouth” [3].

Zi Nong, who was stationed outside the room, had already burst into tears long ago when she suddenly heard the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps. Zi Yan was coming towards the room in a rush, stopping short of the door, she reported in a grave voice: “Reporting to Your Majesty, there is an urgent battlefield report from the border. Deputy General Yu [4] is waiting outside the Garden of Merriment for instructions.” Once she had said these words, Zi Nong and the rest were all greatly shocked, without exception. One has to understand that after Jin Liao had conquered the Great Qi and moved her capital to Dou Yan, although it could be said that the roots of their new empire had not grown deep yet, but Wanyan Xu had governed benevolently and had won over the hearts of the populace. The national strength of Jin Liao was at its zenith and the country and people were now enjoying unprecedented prosperity, so why was there a report of battle at this time?

As they were still feeling stunned, suddenly they saw Wanyan Xu emerge from between the gauzy canopy and say in a solemn voice: “Bring him to the adjoining hall and have him wait there. I will proceed there immediately.” So saying, he turned back to Su Yi and said: “Su Su, you... do you want to go with me?” It turned out that although he had set up Su Yi as his Empress, he knew that his lover did not like this status. Therefore by asking him this question, he meant to imply that he still respected Su Yi's status as a general. Besides, although Su Yi should be resting at the moment, at this moment his pain was too unbearable for him to do that. By bringing him along to listen to the battlefield report, he might be able to direct some of his attention to other things, distracting and releasing him from suffering some of the pain. Although that was his very well-thought out plan, he did not know what Su Yi's reply would be.

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It has to be said that Su Yi did indeed hesitate for a long time over the decision. He instinctively wanted to go along and have a listen; after all, he had been a general and had spent quite a few years of his life engaged in strife on battlefields. Moreover, this matter would also affect the lives of the common people living along the border. But at this time, he was no longer a general and if he were to accompany Wanyan Xu other people might disapprove, although Su Yi did not mind going. Therefore, he vacillated.

Wanyan Xu could guess at his thoughts, and giving a slight smile, he said: "Zi Nong and Zi Yan, both of you help Su Su along, he shall come with me [1]." So saying, he headed off and the two people at his back quickly took to busying themselves with helping Su Yi.

It turned out that a small neighbouring country --- the country of Xiao Ling --- that was on Jin Liao's western border, having seen that the livelihood of the people living in Jin Liao had become more prosperous because of Wanyan Xu's policy of lowering taxation, had surreptitiously hatched a wicked idea. They had mounted a sneak attack with their army, intending to capture a few cities and engage in a spree of looting. But they had not anticipated that what when it came to managing his empire, what Wanyan Xu placed most importance on was national defence. Although there were not very many soldiers guarding the border, they were no longer useless troops like the shrimp soldiers and crab generals [2] of the Great Qi and so the attackers had failed to capture any city. The ruler of that small neighbouring country was a reckless warlord. When he saw that his attack had failed, his anger was roused and relying on the fact that the people of his country were in large part valiant and well-versed in martial arts, he decided that he might as well openly declare war on Jin Liao. Therefore, the general in charge of defending the border had sent his deputy with all haste to the capital to request for reinforcements.

Wanyan Xu gave a "humph" and said: "That barbaric small country, to think that it actually dares to challenge the military might of my Celestial Empire." So saying, he gave a low "hmm" as he pondered. In discussion with Su Yi, he said: "In your

opinion, what should we do about this? Although I already have a stratagem in mind, I still want to hear your recommendations first.” His tone of voice was wholly serious and grave, leaving no doubt that he was not treating Su Yi at all like a member of the Inner Court, but that he was engaging in an important discussion with a trusted confidant.

Su Yi knew of his intentions, and his heart was moved. Wanyan Xu trusted him so much and was always looking out for his best interests; if he were to continue shirking the discussion because of some trivial considerations, then he really would be undeserving of the deep respect and affection that Wanyan Xu bore for him. Therefore he also replied soberly: “Although the neighbouring country is small, but because it is composed of a race of nomads, her people prize martial prowess and spend much time practicing martial arts. Therefore their military strength must not be underestimated. During the time I was stationed along the border, I already heard of them sending raids to harass the common people but because I had to guard against your forces, I did not dare to send any of my troops there to provide assistance. But because they also knew that my command was very close to that area, they did not dare to launch a massive attack that would be sure to meet with reprisal. Therefore the situation dragged on like that. Now, they have dispatched their army without due consideration, although it is not an ideal situation for them, we still must not make the mistake of being complacent. A capable high-ranking military official should be sent to carry out a direct attack, if we cannot annihilate them in a single spurt of energy, I’m afraid that the people of Xiao Ling, who are so fond of violence and plunder, would become a great thorn in our side in future.”

After he had finished, he saw Wanyan Xu nod and say: “I also see things this way.” At that, Su Yi could not help but to sigh and say: “It’s just that you... Alas, Yu Cang has already committed suicide in penance, so who should be given this task?”

Wanyan Xu gave a hearty laugh and said: “Su Su, you look down upon me too much. Don’t tell me that you think that other than Yu Cang, Jin Liao has no other military leader that is capable of directing a glorious battle? Don’t forget, our Jin Liao is also an ethnic group that grows up on the back of horses [3].” So saying, he stood up and paced around for a few laps. Suddenly, he turned around, hugged Su Yi and

said: "Let's go and have a rest. I already have a good candidate in mind and I will nominate him in front of the court tomorrow."

Su Yi was going to object, saying that at such a time, Su Yi could not possibly rest but Wanyan Xu was grinning happily as if the whole thing had not happened. Picking Su Yi up into his arms, he carried him back to the Garden of Merriment. By this time, the sky was already beginning to show traces of first light and along the small paths of the palace, numerous palace maids and eunuchs were already bustling about, busy with their chores. Being seen by them in such a position caused Su Yi to feel deep shame, but there was not even a hole in the ground where he could hide in.

By the time they got back to the Garden of Merriment, he had actually forgotten all about the pain in his leg but resentment was seething in his chest so that he did not care to be mindful of their status or be wary of accusations of meddling in internal affairs anymore. With an ill-tempered look on his face, he first gave Wanyan Xu a round of scolding, hanging metaphorical hats upon him branded with accusations such as "not attending to one's proper duties, negligently underestimating the enemy". Although Wanyan Xu felt unjustly accused, he knew that the pain in Su Yi's leg had not yet disappeared and thus, he did not dare to defend himself and put up with the abuse while feeling aggrieved. In his heart he thought that as long as he could make Su Yi forget the pain in his leg, anything would be worth it even if he had to kneel on a washing board.

And so, for the next few days, Wanyan Xia came by to give Su Yi medication every day. Perhaps it was because he was getting insensitive to the pain, but for some reason it actually seemed to be getting lighter. On the tenth day, after Wanyan Xia had examined him, an easy-going smile blossomed on his face for the first time. Standing up, he said to Su Yi: "From what I can see, there is no great problem left in your legs. From today onwards, you should begin to practice walking. In another few days, you will be just like before, when you were the storied general who had achieved hundreds of victories and dominated the battlefield."

Su Yi gave a bitter laugh and said: "You must be joking, haven't you heard of the saying 'walking through the gates of a noble house is like sinking into the ocean'?"

Not to mention, this is an Imperial house? The days of directing troops on the battlefield, moving around the world unhindered, are behind me. I do not dare to hope for them anymore.”

Wanyan Xia saw that he was feeling sad. Feeling regretful himself, he quickly moved to change the subject, saying: “To tell you the truth, I did not actually believe that you could have endured that kind of pain. Oh yes, a few days ago I heard that fighting had broken out along the border, what is the situation on the battlefield now?”

Su Yi shook his head and said: “I am baffled about this matter too. Wanyan Xu seems to have a well thought-out strategy but there are no reports of victory. Every time I would ask him about it, he would come up with an irrelevant reply. If I get serious, he would say that they're still fighting, they're still fighting. Aii, I really do not know what he's thinking. If I keep pursuing the matter, people would say that I am meddling in the running of the state. But if I don't ask, I also can't bear...”

Before he could finish, Wanyan Xia could not help but to laugh and say: “Your heart has always been connected to the realm, naturally you would be concerned. There's no need to think too much about things like interference in the running of the state. The Emperor's family affairs are also the affairs of the nation. Besides, my Imperial Elder Brother also does not take you to be just a member of the Inner Court, I think that he feels very respectful of you.”

As the two of them were speaking, Wanyan Xu had walked into the room. Wanyan Xia knew that his Imperial Elder brother could not wait for him to leave, and he quickly stood up. Taking his leave, he said: “I'm leaving first, I still have things to attend to. You must remember to practice walking but do not tire yourself out. Practicing in moderation would be better.” So saying, he drifted off, leaving behind Wanyan Xu who immediately went over and embraced Su Yi. However, as to where Wanyan Xu's mind had flown off to, Su Yi could not tell. He was wearing a look of deep contemplation on his face, which caused Su Yi to feel increasingly puzzled.

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After a long time, a smile lit up the whole of Wanyan Xu's face and he asked: "You don't need to take medicine anymore?" Su Yi shook his head and said: "Xia Er says that it has already healed, all I have to do now is to keep practicing walking." And then he asked: "How is the war going along the border? Whether it is good or bad, it is better that you tell me. It would save me from having to be consumed by anxiety and I won't have to wonder about how the people are getting along."

Wanyan Xu smiled and said: "Since you are so concerned, why don't you go there in person and have a look?" After the words had left his lips, Su Yi was so stunned that he stared at Wanyan Xu with wide eyes, and he cried out involuntarily: "What did you say? Wanyan Xu, do you know what you are saying?"

Wanyan Xu hugged him and said smilingly: "Of course I [1] know what I'm saying. Su Su, don't tell me that you don't miss the great expanse of the desert, with its ten-thousand miles of sand? Do you not miss that piece of land that you spent five years of your life guarding with all your heart and blood?"

He gently eased apart Su Yi's fingers, which had become more and more tightly clenched due to his excitement and agitation. With a tone of voice that rang with the sincerity of his feelings, he said: "I know that you miss these things. Your life should not be whittled away in the confines of this cage-like Inner Palace, although you are my Empress and there is no possibility that this status could ever be changed. Not only are you my lover and confidant, but you should also be my right-hand man. At certain times, you should even become a pillar that I can lean on for support. You should laugh and joke with me as we debate military tactics, to admire swordplay with me by the light of the lantern. We should work together to create a land that is both peaceful and prosperous; this spectacular undertaking shall be the crowning achievement of our lives. This is the proper way for you to spend your life, wouldn't you agree? Su Su."

Su Yi already had no idea what he should say to this. Every single word and sentence of Wanyan Xu's had struck a chord in him; every single one had stuck at

his heart of hearts like a heavy hammer. Looking at his beloved, who was staring back at him with a beatific smile on his face, he felt that even ten million sweet speeches and honeyed words would not be able to exceed how much these words had moved him. Along with that, there was also a feeling of deep gratitude. He had never dreamt that after he had been taken prisoner, after he had experienced the destruction of his country, after he had been forced to become the mistress of Jin Liao's Inner Court, he would ever again have the opportunity to be in a favourable position for the use of his skills, or that he would be given the chance to render service to the common people and the country in this way again.

When Wanyan Xu saw the expression of excitement in his eyes, he smiled and added another line: "What is it, Su Su, do you still need me to bestow upon you titles such as Great General or Commander-in-Chief of the three armies?"

Soon after he finished, Su Yi suddenly stood up and said solemnly: "If you can really allow me to return to the battlefield, then it is enough for Su Yi to be allowed into the ranks with the status of an ordinary veteran."

Before the sound of his voice could fade, Wanyan Xu had already hurried to hold him. Alarmed, he said: "Is there a need for this? This leg has not yet totally recovered. Look at you, you actually are not concerned for yourself at all. Even if you are to go, you still have to wait until you have fully recovered. Besides, and it's not like you do not already know, since I want you to revisit your old haunts, I will also definitely have to take part personally in the expedition. In that case, the preparations will also take some time, so why do you need to be so impatient?"

Su Yi was momentarily stunned before saying: "How many more days will it take, would there still be anything left for us to do? Didn't you say that the military leaders under your command are all men who are proficient in fighting battles?"

Wanyan Xu smiled and said: "Although they can all be considered talented commanders, but as you know, Xiao Ling Country is also not a lamp that is running low on fuel. The ruler of Xiao Ling Country has recklessly chosen to launch an attack at this time but he has also committed the whole of his country to this assault.

Therefore this war would not be so easily resolved. But don't you worry, although this is the situation, they are still not able to take one step beyond the wall of lighting that are our troops' stalwart defence of the cities, therefore the lives of the people have not been greatly affected. The primary task that you have to concentrate upon now is to recover normal function in your legs as soon as possible, so that we can depart." After he finished speaking, he suddenly became exhilarated and standing up suddenly, he said: "Su Su, didn't Xia Er say that you have to practice walking often? How about letting me accompany you?"

Su Yi said: "There are so many things that you have to deal with, how could you afford to spend your time like this, I have Zi Nong..." Before he could finish, Wanyan Xu had helped him up. While smiling, he said: "At the moment there are no more matters that require my attention. Come, I will help you, try to walk, one step at a time."

For the lack of a better option, Su Yi had to lean on his arm for support and slowly he took a step. At first there was some pain, but after he had placed his foot down, the pain subsided substantially. Although Wanyan Xu was at his side, supporting him with a steady arm, he was actually even more nervous than Su Yi. The weather was still cold but beads of perspiration were forming on his forehead from the anxiety and he reminded him incessantly: "Slow down, slow down... aii, there's no need to lift your foot so high... yes, that's better..."

On the path leading to the main palace of the Garden of Merriment, two outstanding men could be seen making their way with slow but steady steps, their bodies blending together. Upstairs, from the window overlooking the path, the four people --- Zi Yan, Zi Nong, Zi Nan and Zi Liu --- looked on with their hearts full. Deeply affected and moved, they could hear a low voice drift in occasionally from the window saying: "Su Su, I will end morning court earlier tomorrow, it would be good if you can wait for me so that I can help you comb your hair... Oh yes, do you remember the favourite snack that you had the day before, I have ordered that the Imperial Kitchen is informed of your taste for it, I think that they will be able to send some up today, you should eat it while it's still hot... You still have to keep on drinking those restorative soups religiously, alright? Yes, I know that you do not like to drink it, but you still

have to force yourself. You have suffered too much during these six months, you have to build up your strength again. If you don't drink it, then when can my heart be truly at ease..."

Each line of his gentle exhortations swirled around in the cold wind but among the bleak winter colours, in the corner of the courtyard where the sun was shining, a few young blades of grass were showing their verdant colours of soft green, poking out among the snow. With their arrival, they brought to this vast frozen land a promise of spring.

War Prisoner Extra: Giving Way

Between Wanyan Xu and Su Yi, all misunderstandings had been eliminated, and all their former enmity and grievances had been buried, leaving no traces. After they had shared life and death on the battlefield, and endured its trials and tribulations in solidarity, their feelings for each other grew deeper and deeper by the day. They were unwilling to part with each other for even a moment, as inseparable as honey in oil. Even when Wanyan Xu held court to attend to politics, he would insist on having Su Yi seated by his side, in that way his mind could be free from worry. At first, the assorted ministers of the court were put out by this although they veiled their criticism, but they soon discovered that Su Yi merely listened to the proceedings, and rarely interfered in the affairs of government. On the rare occasions that he did choose to interpose, his opinions were invariably incisive, insightful and well-reasoned, and his audience could not help but to be convinced.

Consequently, the objections gradually died down, and as time went on, it even happened that whenever a courtier felt that the Emperor had made an unfair decision, he might openly request for Su Yi to give his comments. Su Yi's status as the Empress was increasingly winning over the hearts of the ministers, as well as those of the concubines in the harem. At the same time, his imperial dignity was also growing with each passing day, to the point where it could actually come to stand shoulder to shoulder with Wanyan Xu's.

But it was just that this situation caused displeasure in two people. Who do you think they were? They were none other than the pair of father and son that was the most important in the land.

Grievances grew in Wanyan Shuo's heart because his Empress Mother was being monopolized by his Imperial Father, who even demanded that he remain by his side during morning court. As for Wanyan Xu, having his lover's time monopolized by courtiers who requested that he answer their questions, listen to their complaints and right their wrongs, caused him to be in a sour mood.

In his heart, Wanyan Shuo thought: *Imperial Father is really too much, even if Mother Empress is his Empress, is there really a need for them to be affixed to each other all day long. He should still leave some time for me, no matter what he is my Mother Empress after all. Now, he has not even left Mother Empress enough time with me for him to test me on my lessons. Humph, he is even worse than the big bad wolf.*

Wanyan Xu also felt terribly aggrieved: *with the heavens as my witness, ever since the ministers have recognized Su Yi's true character, they have started buzzing around him all day, just like flies, they can't be shooed away even if one tries.* Because of that, there was less and less time to spend with Su Yi, so how could he endure having to vie with his own son? Most importantly, he would fail to best his son every single time. Both the father and the son felt that each of them did not have enough time with Su Yi, and hence, their tug-of-war contest went from hidden to obvious and from sedate to fierce.

Although Wanyan Xu had a high status, he could not control his son, and moreover, his own Mother Empress would always provide back-up for her grandson. On one side, there were the courtiers who refused to observe the wishes of their exalted Emperor and blindly requested to see the Empress for various reasons and they always spoke with him for a long time. Although Wanyan Xu sorely wished to have the whole lot of them sentenced to do penal service or executed, but because his beloved was too fair and reasonable, he did not dare to act blindly without thinking.

Moreover, letting Su Yi attend the morning court was actually his idea, so now he could not even use the excuse of avoiding gossip to forbid the courtiers from meeting with the Empress. Every time he thought of this matter, Wanyan Xu would feel vexed. He had never expected that as one of the most brilliant men of his age, he would actually commit the folly of dropping a rock on his own foot.

Unable to resolve either the internal trouble or the outside aggression, even worse, they showed signs of become ever more critical, Wanyan Xu was left to ponder about the bitter experiences piling up. Finally, he made up his mind and resolved to bring Su Yi away from this environment filled with wolves, worms, tigers and panthers. After that, he would accompany only Wanyan Xu and they would wander around the mountains and forests together, laughing and carefree. And there was only one way to realise this dream, it was: to give way.

And so, on this day, he very amiably put on the countenance of a kindly father. Instructing the Imperial Kitchen to prepare a large pile of snacks that Wanyan Shuo most enjoyed, he requested the company of Su Yi and Wanyan Xia and prepared himself to earnestly instruct and reason with them, so that he could successfully fight for his son to take over his throne.

Su Yi was sitting to the side, still unaware of his beloved's intentions, but he could see that from time to time, a strange smile would tug at the corners of Wanyan Xu's mouth. He couldn't help but be very alarmed and he said: "Wanyan, what is it you are intending to do? I have to remind you, Shuo Er is your son, your very own flesh and blood. If you dare to harm him using me as a reason, I will not let you off."

Wanyan Xu took Su Yi into his arms and said smilingly: "What are you afraid of? I [1] also know that he is my own flesh and blood. You need not worry, the reason I have sent for him, is because I want him to take up my throne. After that, you and I can travel lightly, wander and live with nature, and tour around all the lands of Jin Liao." At that, he bent his head down and gave Su Yi's earlobe a kiss, and asked softly: "Su Su, you don't like it? During our time in the mortal realm, don't you wish to play in it with me?"

Su Yi looked at him, and could not help smiling. Holding his hand, Su Yi said: "Oh you! I already know that you have made up your mind." So saying, he looked out the window before turning his head back to look at Wanyan Xu intently. He gave a sigh laden with emotion and said: "Why do you need to ask me? Don't tell me that you don't already know that I have been longing for this day for a long time? It's just that I was worried that you were still busy with government affairs, it has been a long and difficult road but the people have finally ushered in peace and prosperity..."

Before he could finish, Wanyan Xu covered his mouth and said smilingly: "I am alright. Shuo Er is already so big, and he has devilishly quick wits, he ought to be able to shoulder the responsibility of governing all under Heaven. You better not mention your people so much, I know that in your heart, I am no match for them, so I simply refuse to hear about them."

Su Yi also smiled, and said: "I've never seen a monarch like you, who would even get jealous of his own people. Isn't it also for you that I care so much about the lands of the country and the state." Just as his words faded, Su Yi saw that Wanyan Xu broke out into a big smile and say with a blissful expression: "These words are very pleasing to my ears, hehe, that it is all for my sake."

When he finished speaking, he leaned close and planted a kiss by the side of Su Yi's ear. He whispered: "Su Su, I like to hear you say this line, that it is all for me. Hehe, this feeling is so good. You can take it that I'm being selfish, but in future, can you say it a few more times for me to hear?"

Not waiting for Su Yi to reply, he hugged his beloved and kissed his petal-like lips, unable to restrain his emotions any longer. In the middle of being lost in their emotions, they suddenly heard the sound of a cough coming from beyond the door and an annoyed voice said: "Didn't you say that you were inviting me over to have some food? How come you have started eating already?" Following the sound of that voice, Wanyan Shuo walked in the door with jealousy written all over his face, along with Wanyan Xia, who wore a faint smile on his face.

With regards to this type of behaviour --- sneaking mouthfuls of tofu [2] whenever he could --- from Wanyan Xu, Su Yi had to admit that in all honesty, it made him feel very happy and blessed. But the hateful thing was that this lover always tried to steal a bite with no regard to the situation or the setting. Also, whenever he got hot-headed in public and carried out his plan to sneak a bite, they would always be discovered, if he tried ten times, they would be caught in the act ten times. Just the previous time, it had actually been the Empress Dowager who had caught him red-handed. Oh, at that moment, even Su Yi, the innocent party, had been so ashamed that he could not show his face!

Unfortunately, this arrogant and conceited lover had still not learnt his lesson, and in the end, today he was again caught red-handed, this time by Wanyan Shuo.

Fiercely, he smacked away Wanyan Xu's hands, which were still holding onto him. He no longer had the face to sit upright and still, and could not project the image that was befitting a Mother Empress. He had better not blame Su Yi if he didn't help him push his arguments later.

However, Wanyan Xu's ability to remain poised was not as lacking as Su Yi's, to put it more unkindly, his skin was a lot thicker. Even when faced with his son's sarcasm, he could still maintain an unchanged expression and was even able to immediately display the panache of an Emperor. After seating himself, he pointed to the seats opposite him and said to his son and younger brother: "Ah, you can sit over there, I have something to discuss with the two of you."

Once he heard these words, Wanyan Shuo immediately cried out: "Second uncle, how about this? I already said that this feast is going to be an imaginary one. But you still insisted that I come."

Wanyan Xu couldn't keep his mouth from twitching, in his son's heart, had his image decayed to this extent? He gave a couple of coughs and worked hard at projecting a father's authority. He slapped the table and said: "You degenerate thing, how could you speak like that. What do you mean the feast is imaginary, I'm your Imperial Father, you know?"

Wanyan Shuo gave a “humph” and said: “That’s right, you are my Imperial Father, my Imperial Father who only knows how to rob me of Mother Empress.” Just as he finished speaking, Su Yi was already hastening to try and salvage his beloved's standing as a father which was in imminent danger. To that end, he said, he tried to put in a good word for him: “Shuo Er, don’t speak about your Imperial Father like that, he actually loves you very much. You...”

Before he could finish speaking, Wanyan Shuo had already used his sleeve to cover his face and cried out loudly: “Wu... wa wa... Second Uncle, like I said, Mother Empress is also on Imperial Father's side. Oh, I have a grievance but I have no avenue to appeal for justice, wu wa wa...”

Wanyan Xu and Su Yi exchanged a glance and they both took a sharp gasp of air at the same time. In their hearts both of them were thinking that his strategy of increasing one's vice by ten feet when one was met with a foot of virtue was really pretty good. It would seem that the devilry of this little thing was getting more and more formidable, and now, even Su Yi could no longer rein him in.

Slapping the table again heavily, Wanyan Xu was at a bit of a loss, not know how to curb Wanyan Shuo's shameless behaviour. “That... I demand that you sit down and behave properly, I have something to say to you.” Seeing that Wanyan Shuo was totally not allowing himself to be cowed at all, a thread of anger gradually began to coalesce in his eyes.

“I will say it one last time, sit still.” Holding onto the heavily imposing manner of the True Dragon and Son of Heaven, Wanyan Xu successfully made Wanyan Shuo stop his cries. At the side, Su Yi immediately played the role of the villain [3]. Taking out a handkerchief, he helped the little devil to wipe away the tears whose supply seemed to be inexhaustible no matter how much he used them. At the same time, he quietly coaxed him: “Alright, alright, your Imperial Father is really angry now. Don’t cry anymore, and listen carefully to him. I guarantee you that this time, it is something good.”

“You can tell me.” Wanyan Shuo admitted defeat grudgingly, but he very quickly

added a few more lines: "But I have to tell you, because of Mother Empress's words, a little bit of hope has already risen in my heart. You should not let my hopes be dashed, if you still admit to being my Imperial Father."

What kind of speech was that. Wanyan Xu was almost about to roar in rage, who was it who had spoiled his son so much that he was behaving in such a way, without any respect for laws nor Heaven. He darted a suspicious look at the lover by his side. Immediately, Su Yi glared back at him fiercely with half-narrowed eyes; he had immediately known what Wanyan Xu was thinking. All at once, the Emperor of Jin Liao's surging belligerence lay down its flag and stilled its drums. He could only turn his august gaze back onto his son and he said: "Actually the reason I have sent for you, is to tell you something that is as fortunate as a Heaven-sent blessing."

"Second Uncle, do you believe it?" Wanyan Shuo did not give his old dad a chance to speak further before he opened his mouth to ask his uncle this question in a cold voice.

"How could you say that? Naturally I believe him, you should believe him also, he is your Imperial Father after all." Wanyan Xia smiled placidly, trying with difficulty to diffuse the tensions between this pair of father and son, who were facing off with their metaphorical swords drawn and bows bent.

"Is that so? I still can't really believe it." Wanyan Shuo folded his arms across his chest, and gave full expression to his venomous tongue. When he saw the expression on his father's face become as black as the bottom of a pot because of his anger, ah, he felt so pleased with himself in his heart. Ha ha ha, it felt so good to win a round after conceding the previous one.

Wanyan Xu and Su Yi exchanged a glance, and both of them could recognize the helpless frustration in each other's eyes. They couldn't allow this child to continue acting so wilfully and audaciously any longer, he should be quickly placed on the throne to experience its rigors, so that he will know how difficult it was to be an emperor. He was very satisfied that he had finally found a selfless excuse for his plans.

"I want to pass the throne to you." He said this in a calm and collected way, but he saw that Wanyan Shuo's mouth had slanted in a nonchalant manner.

Wanyan Shuo said: "I know, I am the only son you have, who else could you pass the throne to when you are old? It can't be that your faculties are failing even before you have gotten old." The sound of his voice had barely faded before Su Yi's reproaching voice drifted over, saying: "Shuo Er, you are not to speak of your Imperial Father like that." Very reluctantly, he pursed up his mouth, but he finally stopped speaking rudely.

"No, I mean to immediately pass the throne to you, do you understand my meaning now? Hump Humph, you are not that young anymore, but you only care about playing your naughty pranks all day long, it is time for you to hone your mettle." Without any sense of shame, Wanyan Xu gave his high-sounding excuses, deliberately ignoring his son's wide, round eyes and mouth that was hanging open.

"Second... Second Uncle... you... did you hear what he said? You... did you hear it too, what that person sitting opposite, he who I call Imperial Father, what he said?" With great difficulty, Wanyan Shuo managed to hiss out his words between the gaps of his teeth, and glared at Wanyan Xu with a flinty look in his eyes. The meaning behind that look was clear: *you want to abandon me and go off into the sunset with Mother Empress, no way!* At the same time, he had already thought of a way to deal with his Imperial Father's fustian excuses for passing the throne to him.

"Oh, I heard it, it is indeed a very good thing. Shuo Er is probably too pleasantly surprised, and thus, is still a bit disbelieving." He deliberately misconstrued the meaning behind his nephew's question, in his heart he gave a helpless sigh and he thought: *ah Imperial Elder Brother, this is the only thing I can do to help you, although it may not be of much use.*

"Pleasantly surprised? Second Uncle, do you really think so? Or is it that you cannot differentiate between the two distinctly different expressions of someone being pleasantly surprised and unpleasantly shocked?" Wanyan Shuo assumed the

demeanour of a troublemaker and gave a couple of sneers before saying: "Since the conversation has taken such a turn, and Imperial Father has even finagled such just and honourable excuses to justify your plans, I think that in all likelihood, I will not be allowed to refuse, am I right? Alright then, I will make an effort to accept a difficult situation and agree. See, I, you son, am so fair and reasonable, you must be thank me well!"

Not caring to fuss over whether their son was being disrespectful in his speech, when Wanyan Xu and Su Yi heard him say "alright then, I will make an effort to accept a difficult situation and agree", they were so delirious with joy that they couldn't even remember where the direction of north was.

They exchanged a glance, and Su Yi said quietly: "Who was it who was saying that Shuo Er is annoying, isn't this child very good? Look, he didn't even make things difficult for you before he agreed."

Wanyan Xu also nodded repeatedly as he said: "That's right, that's right, I have mistakenly blamed him in the past, but I will be sure to dote on him well in the future."

"Ah, Shuo Er, Imperial Father cannot thank you enough, alright? Hehe, you are my good son indeed, you are truly worthy of me passing the throne to you so early." Once he heard his son's words and realised that his dreams of travelling around the lands with Su Yi would be so easily realised, he beamed with happiness and his unruly son immediately became a benevolent child in his eyes.

It was a pity, but Wanyan Shuo did not appear to be the slightest bit moved by his profession of gratitude. Instead, Wanyan Xu saw the little devil remain unruffled at such an important time, picking up a piece of food, he waved his hand to indicate that Wanyan Xu should stop praising him. He said: "Don't be so happy yet, there is a condition I must mention, I will only take the throne if you can meet it."

"Go ahead and tell me, as long as you agree, I will accept even a hundred conditions, not just one." In a generous mood, Wanyan Xu waved his hand

expansively. In his heart he was thinking that he since he was pressing his son onto the throne at such a young age for his own selfish reasons, he should also compensate him well. Unfortunately, his moment of conscience was not to last for long.

He watched as Wanyan Shuo finished his snack, and after brushing the crumbs off his hands, he sidled up to Su Yi's side with a beaming smile. Pulling at Su Yi's sleeve, he said to Wanyan Xu: "As you know, my homework has always been supervised and graded by Mother Empress. If you are in such a hurry to make way for me on the throne, I will very generously overlook your selfishness but Mother Empress must stay by my side to advise me on statecraft. This request isn't unwarranted, is it? As long as Mother Empress remains by my side, you can go where you please, I'll even be happy that there is no one here that I have to vie with. Imperial Father, you need not worry, I will surely govern the lands under Heaven well, I won't let you down."

It was fortunate that Wanyan Xu had been the Emperor for so many years, and had inevitably learned to maintain a certain measure of composure under pressing circumstances. But even so, he still nearly picked his son up by the scruff of his collar. "Have you thought of who your Mother Empress is? He is my Empress, the EMPRESS. After I leave the throne to you and go travelling around the world, he would accompany me as a matter of course. You want Su Su to stay here, you do not have a single door that would open to success!"

"Humph humph, you have finally said it yourself. Actually, your motive is to go on a scenic tour with Mother Empress, and to push the heavy burden over to your son's soft and immature shoulders. Imperial Father, I will tell you, you do not even have a single window that would open to success." Wanyan Shuo also stood up, and fearlessly faced off with his father, the same way that a dead pig does not fear boiling water.

"Aiya, sit down, the two of you. Whatever next!" He would never expect to find himself to be such a popular personage in ten-thousand years, and Su Yi hurriedly tried to mediate in their quarrel: "Wanyan, if Shuo Er doesn't wish to ascend the

throne so early, then you should just let him be.” He saw his beloved fixed him with a piercing stare as he said: “Su Su, don’t tell me that you don’t wish to travel around the world with me anymore?”

“I do wish to, but won’t this...” Su Yi heaved a sigh and turned to Wanyan Shuo again to say: “Shuo Er be good, let your Imperial Father have his way once, he...” Before he could finish his speech, he saw that the little devil had tears streaming down his face again and he said in an ill-treated manner: “Mother Empress, does that mean that you don’t want me anymore? Wu wu wu, Shuo Er has been without a mother from an early age, I waited so long for someone like you to come, don’t tell me that you want to abandon Shuo Er so quickly? Wu Wu wu...”

“Of course not, of course not...” Su Yi hurriedly took Wanyan Shuo into his arms and gently patted him as he cajoled the child. When he looked up, he was met with the sight of Wanyan Xia’s helpless expression as he said: “I think the two of you had better just forget it, if you want to fight against this little thing, hehe... go back and wrack your brains for a foolproof plan first.”

“Not taking over, not taking over, wu wu wu, bad Imperial Father is trying to force me, I’m going to find Imperial Grandma, I want Imperial Grandma to judge the right of this matter.” Knavishly, Wanyan Shuo brought out his greatest supporter, causing Su Yi’s expression to change in a split second. Heavens, If the Empress Dowager were to know that the father and son had had a falling out over himself, that would be awful. No, no, a person must not sink to such a shameful level.

Su Yi suddenly stood up, and using an insufferably arrogant tone of voice he issued his command: “Wanyan, you need not think about it anymore. Shuo Er is still little, and you are still young. How could you do something as preposterous as abdicating? It will become the butt of everybody’s jokes under Heaven. About the matter of travelling around the world, we can discuss it again after you have turned sixty.”

“That... that can’t be right? When I’m sixty? The two of us will be old and grey by then.” Wanyan Xu stared at his beloved in a daze, not daring to believe that the plan he had spent so long strategizing for had died in its infancy just like that. But if even

Su Yi did not support his scheme, there was definitely no way for him to successfully carry it out by himself.

Infuriated he looked in the direction of his son, who was already munching on the snacks happily. *Humph humph, just you wait, how could such an illogical thing happen, that a father should experience defeat at the hands of his son. Although I have failed to give way today, but the day will come that I will give way to you and travel around the world with Su Su.* Wanyan Xu secretly vowed to himself that he would never let such a beautiful aspiration be realised only when he had already become some decrepit monster with chicken skin and crane hair.

War Prisoner Extra: The Boundless Colours of Spring [1]

During the course of a year, the season Su Yi always loved the most was autumn. The skies would seem to hover high above the earth, the clouds would be light, the moon would be bright and the winds would be gentle. Also, in the autumn afternoons, when he was reading a book while reclining on the couch, he would sometimes feel drowsy. When he was floating at boundary between wakefulness and slumber, his mind would quietly think back on some of the happy memories he had of the past. Those autumn afternoons were really a time of such contentment that he found it impossible to describe.

On this day, Wanyan Xu and his son had been wholeheartedly wishing to accompany Su Yi but after they had had their lunch, they were summoned by the Empress Dowager, who wished to have a chat with them. Because she knew of Su Yi's habit of taking a nap in the afternoon, the Empress Dowager did not send for him and recently, Wanyan Xia had been absorbed, day and night, in nursing and tending to two of the precious medicinal plants he had planted, and had not visited Su Yi for a few days. For a long time, Su Yi had not encountered such a quiet afternoon. With his heart at ease, he picked up a legendary work of fiction and settled himself down on the couch that was set below the window. As he looked over the book, he was breathing in the scent of the osmanthus flowers that drifted in through the window and gradually, his movements of flipping the pages of the book began to slow down,

and finally stilled completely.

Upon careful inspection, it turned out that his pair of eyes had become half-lidded; his thoughts had drifted to a certain afternoon of the previous year. Among the many sweet memories that Su Yi had, it was also the one memory that Su Yi had kept hidden away.

That incident happened a month after Wanyan Xu and Su Yi had personally taken part in the expedition that had set off to battle against the country of Xiao Ling. On this day, they had finally completely defeated Xiao Ling country and taken thirty-thousand royal soldiers captive. Compelled by the circumstances, the ruler of Xiao Ling had to concede defeat, agreeing to become a vassal state of Jin Liao and also to agree to send tribute to Jin Liao every year henceforth.

Even since Wanyan Xu had Su Yi at his side, his heart had grown more benevolent by the day and so, he released many of the captives and signed a treaty with Xiao Ling country, not even asking for much in the way of tribute. When Su Yi saw that his beloved had learned how to treat others charitably, his heart was much gladdened. Because the war had also been very hard-fought, the two men had decided to let the officers and soldiers of all the upper, middle and lower armies bivouac at the border to recover their strength before making their triumphant return to the capital.

During the past month and for some time before that, both Wanyan Xu and Su Yi had had their hearts worried over the war, their mental and physical energies had been completely consumed by it, and by this time, they were both exceedingly tired as well. It was only now, when peace had been restored to the borders, that the two people could finally relax. When taking a comfortable bath, Su Yi even rested his head on the rim of the pool, and fell asleep while still immersed in the water.

It was not until an indeterminable length of time had passed, when the warm rays of the afternoon sun were shining into the room, that Su Yi woke up from the dark and sweet oblivion of his nap, only to find that he had been sleeping on a broad and solid chest. The sounds of a familiar steady breathing came from above his head, and peering through the layer and layers of muslin drapes, he saw that there was not

even a single person in the room. Faint threads of smoke slowly rose in spirals from the censer, scenting the air with a faint fragrance. He slowly retracted his head and pressed his face against the muscular chest of a light wheat colour, quietly listening to each ring of the powerful heartbeat, which was the sound that he found to be the most reassuring in the whole world.

“Su Su...” Suddenly, a hoarse voice came from the direction above his head, and abruptly startled Su Yi from his reverie. He hastened to shy away, and he secretly felt embarrassed over this womanish act, although he would of course not allow his feelings to show on the surface. He straightened up and said: “It is time to wake, you actually slept until this time, this is the first time this has ever happened.” His tone of voice was clear and cool, strong and unyielding, betraying no hint of the kind of happiness and contentment he had just been feeling moments earlier.

Wanyan Xu pulled his body back, and looked into his clear, bright eyes. In the next moment, without taking any time for explanations, he moved his lips close, and seized the opportunity to press Su Yi down. After a lengthy kiss, the two of them were both panting hard for breath. Su Yi was just about to speak when Wanyan Xu said in a husky voice: “Su Su, I want it.”

Under normal circumstances, Su Yi would certainly reject his request; it was still broad daylight, and how could he, who had received instructions by sages from the time he could remember, ever be willing to dally with Wanyan Xu at such a time? Just that, when he saw that his lover's face was suffused with lust and that his usually clear eyes were now hazy with desire which he was failing to suppress despite his best efforts, Su Yi's heart suddenly softened.

He was also moved by Wanyan Xu's respect for him, that he had not forgotten to seek his opinion even at such a time like this. Ah, this is the person that he had whole-heartedly fallen in love with. A wave of heat washed over his body, and Su Yi remained silent, swallowing his refusal. He smiled as he looked across at his lover as he slowly undid the ties of his undershirt, and the soft satin fabric promptly slipped off, revealing his evenly muscled figure.

With a gurgle, Wanyan Xu swallowed a mouthful of saliva, and in a flash, he threw himself at Su Yi, wildly planting kisses on his face, shoulders and chest, while muttering to himself: "Su Su, I love you I love you I love you..." In two or three moves, he ripped the clothes off his own body, and the two undressed men were face to face in a tight embrace.

Even though they had had sex many times, Su Yi's behind was still as tight and narrow as it had been the first time. The rod at Wanyan Xu's lower body had long since been standing tall and erect, but he forced himself to show restraint. Using the pad of two of his fingers, he gently rubbed at the opening that was soon to bring himself infinite joy as he tenderly asked Su Yi: "Afraid?"

Su Yi shook his head softly, because he knew that his lover would not hurt him. He continuously took deep breaths, and worked hard at relaxing his body, feeling that with the efforts of the both of them, that place was slowly stretching and opening up. A slight feeling of shame still slid across his heart, and unconsciously, he averted his eyes. But in the very next second, he gave an alarmed cry of "AH". It turned out that Wanyan Xu had already removed his fingers, and his massive thing had been driven to the very deepest part of Su Yi in the next second.

The feeling of pain was not actually that intense, it was just that Wanyan Xu had never been this wild before. Su Yi glared at him fiercely as he said: "You did that deliberately?" It was a question asked with much certainty in his voice. Therefore Wanyan Xu also admitted in a very easy manner as he nodded: "That's right, who asked you to turn your head away every time, as if I am forcing myself upon you."

After that he bent his head down again, and quietly laughed by Su Yi's ear: "Ah, in fact, that part of you had gotten slick after I rubbed it a few times, that's why my thing can slide into it so smoothly."

"Wanyan Xu, I'll kill you." Su Yi roared furiously, his hand had just been raised when Wanyan Xu suddenly started to pound away fiercely, taking Su Yi completely by surprise. His rhythm got faster and faster, and his alternating deep and shallow thrusts successfully stopped Su Yi's action to murder his own husband in its tracks,

changing it to a move to put his arms around the back of the strong body on top of his own. "Wanyan Xu... you... ah... ah... you... you are a... ah... you... you quickly stop doing this..."

All of a sudden, all movements were suddenly halted. The ill-intentioned lethal weapon completely quit the battleground, and Su Yi's gut, which had been stretched to its extremes, could not adapt to this sudden feeling of emptiness and still kept on pulsating, one moment tightening, one moment relaxing. Su Yi stared at Wanyan Xu with a blank expression, only to hear him put on an innocent manner and say: "Su Su, I listened to you and stopped. Ah good, good, you have learned to hold onto me, in the past you always tore at the sheets with your hands."

"You are a bastard." Su Yi was so infuriated that he employed foul language to curse out Wanyan Xu. Just as he was about to relax his arms, Wanyan Xu said something with the speed of light by the side of his ear: "Aiyo, indeed one who has had his lust go unsatisfied flies into an impressive rage, ah."

After saying that, he rapidly placed the two long and slender legs on his own shoulders; this position made it more convenient for him to penetrate deeply. That erect lethal weapon effortlessly burst into that little hole, which had not closed up completely, once again. Again there was another spell of mad dashes and vigorous slams, and Su Yi's body was tossed around like duckweed in the rain, rising and falling according to Wanyan Xu's movements. At the second when their union had become most intimately close, all the frenzied movements stilled, all of Su Yi's moans were stopped and he felt like a wave of searingly hot magma had been fired into his guts, so scalding that his whole body trembled incessantly.

"Su Su, I love you." Once again, he said these deeply emotional words, finally restoring the senses of Su Yi, who had become muddle-headed with pleasure. Angrily, he pushed his lover away, and said coldly: "I couldn't see it, you only flaunted your power over me. Alright, you have already done both what you should have and what you shouldn't have, it's time that you get out of bed."

So saying, he made a great effort to sit up, only for Wanyan Xu to pounce on him

again. “No Su Su, I still want it, we have already not done it for a month.”

“Get up... ah... you... ah...” The end result was, of course, as one can well imagine, that his insides, which had already been well-lubricated by semen, did not care at all about what their owner wished. Very happily, it accepted the lethal weapon which had speedily become distended again, and it even very loyally reacted in a way that made its owner be in seventh heaven. With its assistance, the owner of the lethal weapon staged a theatrical number of boundless spring colours in that room that afternoon.

“Wanyan Xu, I want to kill you.” While still dreaming, Su Yi suddenly shouted out this one line, and successfully scared Wanyan Xu, who had just entered the room, dead in his tracks. Very cautiously and solemnly, he attentively looked at his beloved, who still appeared to be asleep, while carefully mulling over whether he could have done something bad recently that could arouse Su Yi's anger.

In the end, his answer was that he had not. The Heavens could be the judge, for Su Yi's sake he had changed to become so merciful. And also, ever since a certain afternoon when he had wanted his lover repeatedly, and been forced to practice abstinence by his lover for a month after that, he had never again dared to do any bad thing.

Could it be that Su Su missed him too much, and so, was blaming him for not napping with him?

With his mind befuddled by his wishful thoughts, Wanyan Xu quickly climbed onto the couch happily, and gently took his beloved into his embrace, as his heart continued to indulge in sweet dreams: *Ah, maybe after Su Su woke up, he could take advantage of his good mood and maybe they could revisit that incident that happened on that afternoon the year before. Ah, that was a taste of manifold rapture, a wonderful time of boundless colours of spring.*

End of War Prisoner Extra: The Boundless Colours of Spring

(COMPLETE TRANSLATION)